

# IN THE NIGHT

*Baleka Kgotsitsile*

**M**omathemba told Xola, her husband, about her childhood, not really being certain where she was heading, memories flashing through her mind in the dark bedroom.

'Now I understand why my parents were anxious about me. But the tension that was between us nearly sent me the wrong way.'

'What do you mean by the wrong way?' Xola asked.

She was quiet while her mind tried to sort out the best way to answer: Would Xola understand? Could he? Then a scene planted itself as it had done so many times before while she was growing up, in the centre of her mind.

Nomathemba, still a little girl, is trying desperately to convince her father that she was an hour late from school because she stayed to help some classmates understand the English Literature book they were going to write a test on the following day. Before she finishes the first sentence, the back of a big hand explodes on her mouth.

Simultaneously there is an angry 'Shut up' from her father. And suddenly the world flashes around her with light and blackness, bitter in her mouth and sweetly painful. She gets up from the floor where she has fallen, tries hard to suppress crying, while she wipes blood from her mouth and feels if she still has all her teeth. Her father lectures her furiously about how ungrateful she is.

'I sweat day and night for you, only for you to do this to me. You've started going out with boys, I know. And you have the cheek to ANSWER BACK! Where have you ever heard of a child trying to prove her parent WRONG, bloody fool!' And at this her father, blinded by fury, picks her up and crashes her against the wall. She crumples to the floor where she remains, numb with fear. He kicks her all over the body, until her mother, arriving from a prayer-meeting comes to her rescue.

'You see, the thing is that ... maybe because of the way a child's mind works, at some point I convinced myself that my parents hated me. And I think that was very dangerous.'

'But it seems that it was mostly your father who beat you up, wasn't it? Usually mothers help out and even from your stories it's clear your mother came to your rescue many times. So why

did you include her when you thought they hated you?'

'It's true, sometimes she came to my rescue. But there were many other times when she also beat me nearly to death. I think that, as I grew up, the unhappy things stuck more in my mind than the happy ones.'

'Also, some very ugly things could have been avoided if I had not been so afraid of my parents. Like ... eh ...'

'What?' Agitatedly, Xola sat up and fumbled for a cigarette in the dark. His breathing had become faster.

Her mind went back to that evening sixteen years back, when she was sixteen years old. Over the years she had thought back to that night and wished so much she could forget it. But she had to talk about it. That way it would be better for both of them. She would talk.

That afternoon when she got back from school she washed the kitchen curtains. She would iron them and put them up the following morning before going to school. She then started cooking stiff-pap and greens on the primus stove that stood on the kitchen table under the bare window. She would do her arithmetic homework after washing the dishes at night.

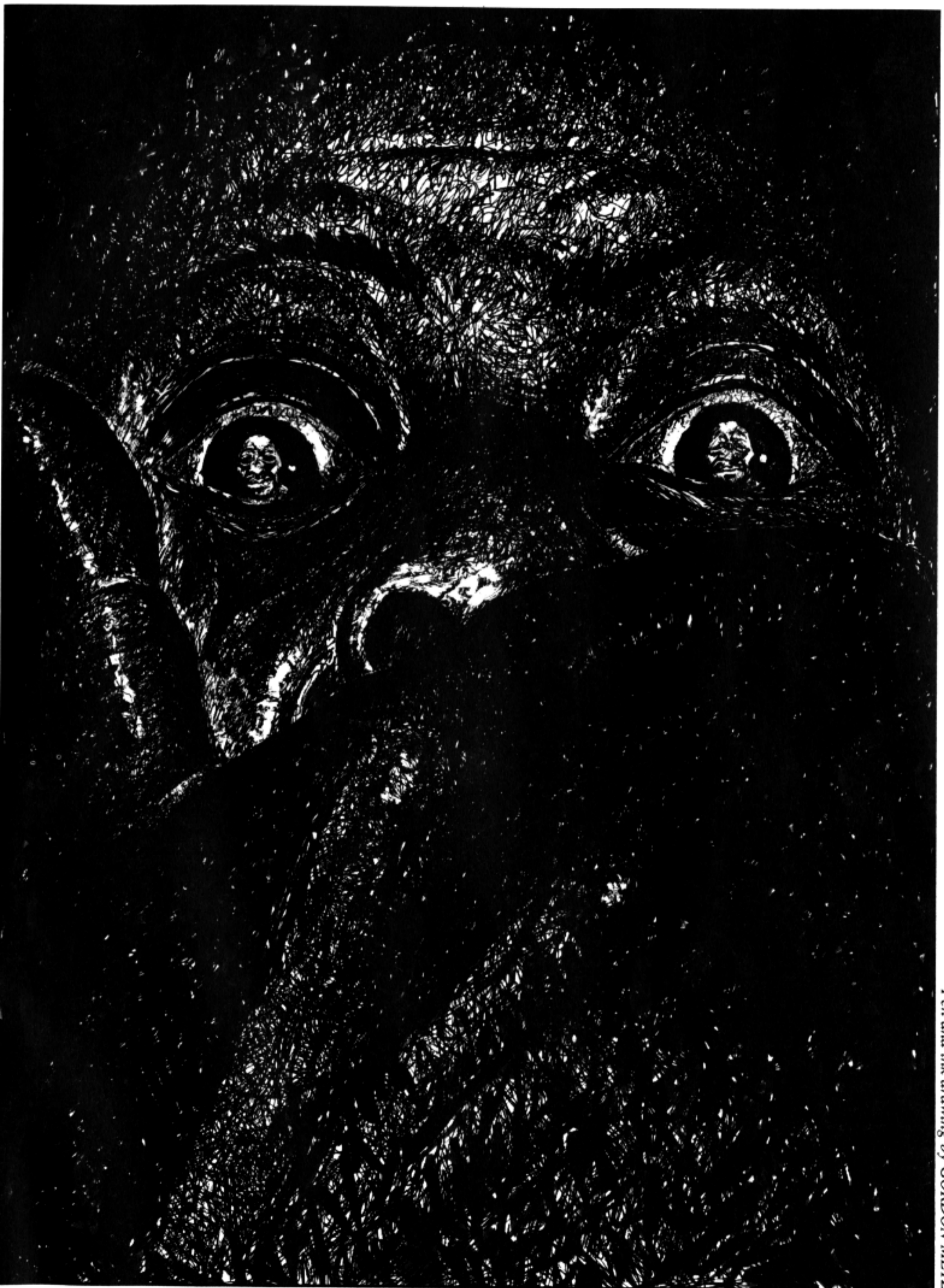
'Sis' Thembi, Sis' Thembi,' she heard her nine-year-old brother call as he came in through the gate from goodness-knows where. He sounded overjoyed about something. She wondered what he'd been up to, and stifened her face and voice into her 'big-sister' profile.

'What is it, Kwanele? Stop shouting like that! What is it?'

'The ... the ... teacher', Kwanele was out of breath with excitement and running. 'He is calling at the corner house. He gave me this money and is going to give me another one when you come with me.' He showed his sister a five-cent coin boastfully.

She immediately knew whom he was talking about. She had seen him there a few times. There was a rumour that he was having an affair with the daughter of the woman who sold liquor in that house. The rumour went that the shebeen-queen knew about it and allowed it because Mac Dubula was a teacher. That to her was a symbol of status.

Nomathemba disliked him. He taught at her school. The girls were always talking about how many girlfriends he had among the schoolgirls. She had no respect for him. He had a wife and



Pen and ink drawing by GORDON METZ

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children in another township, an hour's train-ride away, on the other side of the white-man's city.

'Kwanele, why did you take that money from him? You take it back, now, before I give you a hot slap on your silly face. And I'm not going there, I'm working.'

Four or five hours later, around nine o'clock, she was washing dishes at the kitchen table when she sensed a presence at the window. She lifted her eyes from the dishes and — yes it was a big man standing directly in front of her, just outside the bare window.

She looked back at the dishes, puzzled at this ... this strange thing happening, someone standing in her father's yard at that hour. Then she remembered about the teacher that afternoon. She looked back at the form outside, and ... of course it was him.

A tremor went through her whole body. What if her father came into the kitchen at just that moment?

That day things were bad. She had made it daily practice to check her parents' mood when they returned home. And she knew that day the weather was very cloudy, first by looking at her father's face as he walked in, and later by eavesdropping on her parents' conversations.

And now here was this stupid man standing there; did he know her father? He might try to catch him. If he didn't catch him, 'woe unto her', she would suffer for both of them. And the neighbours would all hear and think she was a bad child. Oh, what was she going to do!

Urgently she went out and told the teacher to go away before her father saw him there. But he was drunk and totally insensitive to her desperate pleas.

'I want to talk to you, my sweet little darling. I love you, I loved you from the first day I set my eyes on your beautiful body. You are so ...'

This drunk fool thought she was stupid enough to believe these lies that were coming out of his stinking mouth. She realized that there was no way she could reason with him.

She went back and finished the dishes quickly, her mind grinding, desperately looking for the quickest and best solution to this problem.

Every night before her father went to bed, he came through the kitchen and took a slow walk around his small yard. You never knew what might be lurking in or around the yard in the township..

She went to the bedroom she shared with the other children to check the situation. The others were asleep. Both parents were in their own bedroom. Their door was half-open, which meant that they were still awake. It was nine-fifteen and her father would soon want to retire, especially after an unpleasant day at work.

She had to get that teacher out of the yard quickly.

She went out, making sure that her parents didn't hear her leaving the bedroom, let alone the kitchen. She signalled the teacher to follow her out of the yard, into the street, very careful not to let the gate make a noise.

Beyond the house on the right there was a footpath that led into the next street where they would be out of sight of the house.

As soon as they got there she talked calmly to the teacher, trying to persuade him to go away. She told him she had to get back home as they would miss her if she stayed away long. He threatened to follow her back there as he was just too in love with her to let her out of his sight. He held her wrist firmly and led her away, going on about how wonderful she was and everything.

She walked on, tense and quiet, only now and again being conscious of what he was saying. Her wrist firmly clasped in his hand, she walked on without decision, without purpose, her parents' screams whirling in her head.

Down in the street, on the left there were ten matchbox four-roomed houses, on the right there was a primary school. All was dark and quiet at the school. Beyond it, in front of them, was a bush with a footpath cutting through it. They had walked for five long minutes, and now stood on the street at the point where the footpath ended.

The teacher dragged her into the bush. She tried to resist and pull away, but he was too big and strong in spite of his drunkenness; he was not even staggering, which surprised and puzzled her.

'So you think you're too high and mighty eh? Respectable and decent people. In and out of church, day in and day out. So you look down on my kind, because I'm only a simple teacher ... not even a principal or an inspector. Well, my girl, we'll see if I can't do some inspecting outside school hours, my little bush-baby.'

She pleaded with him to let her go, promising to make time to see him the following afternoon. He ignored all her pleas and kept dragging her into the bush. She pleaded and pleaded. Tears started rolling down her cheeks. Oh Lord, please! She wondered

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**'A lonely teardrop escaped her as she swallowed the memories of many girls, eager, naive, who fell prey to cruel adults.'**

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if her mother's God saw her in this predicament. She looked up to the sky and saw the moon disappearing behind a big cloud, as if to avoid the plea in her eyes. Where was God, her mother's God? Why was he not helping her out of this? But of course He had never come to her rescue on the many occasions she had been beaten up until she bled for things she had not done.

She could scream, but she dared not at this point anyway. When everybody came out to see who was screaming and why, they would send for her parents. And how could she begin to convince them that she had not come out of her home and so far away because she was evil; an evil ungrateful child who wanted nothing but to see them disgraced and dying of heart trouble. Screaming was out of the question. How could she face the world after that? She could hear the women sympathizing with her mother. 'We are sorry for her; she did not give birth to a child, her womb produced rot.'

Deeper and deeper into the bush she was dragged by Mac Dubula, the teacher. And the following morning at Assembly, he would be standing in front of the 800 young faces. He would be solemn, conducting the singing. Grim-faced, delivering the morning's talk to the school, smooth-tongued, eyes half closed. Only the occasional smile towards the school-head as if begging for praise, for some approval.

She had been brought up never to prove an adult wrong. God does not like children who do that, they end up roasting in hell. But here was one adult, a teacher, dragging her into a fearful-looking bush, at that time of night.

This was her dying day; this man, her parents, the bush, she was going to be killed today. What had she done? Why? No! she cried her despair. Her body became numb and nothing registered in her mind any longer. From very far away it seemed his voice came to her in tiny capsules, tinnily echoing only this one idea: 'So they think I'm not a man; well, then, I'll show them now, all of them, all of you ... who ...'

When she came back to her senses she was conscious of a heavy burden on her and a searing pain in her groin. It was as if her legs were being pulled apart in an attempt to tear her up into two. She had never felt so much pain.

She was still crying and sweating. She did not know how long she had been in that position. She was sick. The teacher had his big moist hand over her mouth and was brutally pushing in and out of her.

It would be better if she could vomit the liquor fumes and all of this. As if reading her thoughts, he removed his hand and pushed a slimy thick tongue into her mouth. Again she had a blackout. She was shivering when she came to again. Her whole body ached. She tried to make out where she was.

'Ha-ha, my sweet little darling, now you're mine forever. You're so sweet. Ha, you nearly scared me when you started screaming. But you would have regretted it. YOU would have suffered. We would both be expelled from the school; but that's okay. I have my certificates, and you? Ha-ha, my sweet little one, I love. Your people are big ones, and you are my little one. You are sweeter than my wife. And she's a nothing. Are you not proud to hear that? Hmm ... With you by my side, I'll go places. I'll show them how much marrow there is in these bones, as I've shown you. You learned more from me now than in school. Wasn't I good?'

She was weak and aching all over. She hoped ... she silently prayed to God, any God who cared to listen and help — not to be touched by this cruel man again, that's all, he must not touch her again.

But he did. She had never remembered clearly what took place. Between the blackouts she wished and hoped to die. The pain, the pain was unbelievable. She never remembered how many times she was assaulted by the teacher that night. She never remembered even walking back home. She remembered only that the kitchen door was as she had left it, unlocked. Maybe some God heard her prayers after all. But his last words rang in her ears all the time. She heard them now still, clearly. 'You can't get me out of you now, ever. You'll never forget me. They think I'm nothing but you can tell them who I am.'

'Do you know if that bastard is still alive?' Xola asked, lighting the fourth in a chain of cigarettes.

'I think so. He should be in his late fifties now,' she answered with a slow sigh.

'That's one fool I'd like to kill in my life,' Xola said bitterly, getting into bed and pulling her to him.

A lonely teardrop escaped her as she swallowed the memories of many girls, eager, naive, who fell prey to cruel adults. She thought about her daughter, tried to visualize her at sixteen.

They lay in each other's arms in the dark, awake but quiet, till the song of the cocks reminded them that morning was unfolding.