

# THE WEDDING PARTY

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MINNIE NCGOBO and Pritchard were married in church on her afternoon off. Their fourth child was then almost two years old. Pritchard had at last given in to her nagging. He made a fuss at losing a day's pay, though.

After the ceremony Minnie went to her mother's house in the location to see her children and to tell everyone the good news. Pritchard had not come with her and she had not seen him since. She supposed he was spending a few days with friends, or with some new woman. He would turn up again, as usual. He kept his clothes in her room.

On the Monday morning following the ceremony, when Minnie was on her knees polishing the red stoep, she decided to give a wedding party. She became so excited that she called to her friend Sanna whom she could see moving about in the kitchen next door.

"Sanna, Sanna."

There was no response, only a clatter of crockery. Minnie sat up on her haunches. Her thin dress was tucked up, exposing her fat thighs.

"Hey you, Sanna," she shrilled. The clatter ceased. A thin anxious black face surmounted by a white maid's cap appeared at the kitchen window.

"Eh? What do you want. I'm busy. The old white cow is lying in bed calling for her breakfast. Oh, hurry Minnie, hurry. What do you want? What's happened?"

They both spoke in Zulu.

Minnie took her time to reply. She loved to tease Sanna who was most inquisitive and spent much of her time nosing out the gossip among the African servants in the suburban street.

Sanna leaned out of the window.

"Minnie," she begged. "Come, tell me. I can't wait. The eggs are almost ready ... Oh dear, the toast is burning." She vanished.

Her friend chuckled softly down inside her comfortable belly. She rubbed hard at a patch of polish, humming tunefully. She loved to sing hymns as she worked. Her voice was deep, like a man's. Life was good this morning. She was married ... married

now in church as the priest had told her. She was a step nearer heaven ...

"Hey, Minnie, You! Tell me ... ple-ease." Sanna was in the garden, leaning over the wire fence.

"It's nothing, really."—smearing another square of the stoep with polish. "I'll tell you later. Can't you see I'm busy?"

Sanna banged the bucket she was carrying against the fence. She bit her lower lip in vexation, turned and walked slowly down the path towards her room at the bottom of the garden.

Minnie watched her out of the corner of her eye. Sanna dawdled along but she did not turn round.

When the little maid reached her door, she put down the bucket and fumbled in her apron pocket for her key.

"Sanna, Sanna." No response. That key was hard to find, though. "Don't tell anyone. I'm having a party on Saturday night. It's my wedding party. It's a secret now. Will you come?" She paused. "Bring Phineas along also."

Her friend did not reply at once. Phineas was her lover. Minnie had been ogling him over the fence when he came from work in the evenings. And now, this invitation! She never troubled to hide her desire for men. Wedding party indeed!

"Thank you, my sweet, I'd love to come." She spoke in English. "I don't know about Phineas, though. I'll ask him tonight. You and he are strangers, so to speak." She banged her door behind her before Minnie could reply.

As Sanna made her bed she forgot her anger and danced with excitement.

"A party," she whispered. "A party. Oh, how lovely." She had to talk to someone. She leaned out of the window and called to Alfred sweeping the drive next door. "Alfred, Hey, you."

Alfred, immersed in the rhythm of his broom did not hear. He was not thinking, just sweeping ... sweeping. All the leaves and stones and loose sand had to move in a straight line down the drive.

"Alfred, do you hear me! Stop sweeping and listen to me." Her insistent voice eventually penetrated. He grunted and spat into a rose bush. He went on sweeping until the line of rubbish was straight again.

Sanna watched him in silence. He had heard her. She had swept too. She understood that she must wait. She became immersed in his sweeping ... sweeping the leaves and stones and the loose sand down the drive. She knew the importance of keeping the rubbish in a straight line.

Alfred straightened his tired back and wiped the sweat from his forehead as he leaned on the broom. He smiled at Sanna. "Ja, sweetie," he said cheerfully in English. "What you want? You change ya mind? I come t' ya room jus' now."

Sanna simpered.

"No ... the missus is here, anyway. No. Alfred, have you heard the news? Have you heard about Minnie?" She paused for effect.

"What ... she find 'nother man for husban'?" asked Alfred without any real interest. He lit a stompie behind his shielding hands.

"She ... she's going to have a party. Do you hear, a pa-arty for her wedding. Will you come? Don't tell anyone. She asked me not to. On Saturday night. I need a new dress."

A long pause.

"Would you like ... to take me to the party? I don't want ... think Phineas can come."

"I come jus' now. We can speak." Alfred exhaled a vast cloud of cigarette smoke. "I finish this sweep jus' now." He pinched off the burning end of the inch-long stompie, carefully put the remains in his shirt pocket, and began sweeping willingly.

As he swept he whistled the same six notes over and over, monotonously. Sanna watched him for a while. Soon she could see that he had forgotten her and the party. He was immersed once more in his sweeping, sweeping ... He would come to her room, though.

Sanna sighed as she turned from her window. She could hear her mistress calling from the house.

Within a few minutes of Minnie's confidential shout to Sanna, the news of the party had spread to the servants on both sides of the street. For the rest of the week, the street hummed with their gossip.

Everyone was sure of an invitation.... The burning question was, whom else would Minnie ask to come?

Of course, Samuel Phiri will be invited. Haven't you heard? He spends his nights in Minnie's room, so they say. Samuel's cousin is always with him. You know the tall delivery man at the grocer's, the one who wears the smart blazer with purple and green stripes ... and then there's that awful woman he goes about with, what's-her-name, who spends hours standing on the corner near the post office talking to him, smoking his cigarettes. Go on, you must have seen her. The one who looks so dirty in blue overalls ... They say she wears nothing underneath!

You men always notice such things. You'll probably want that slut from the corner house at the party, too. The way she leans over the gate with her breasts bulging, talking to every man who goes past.

Now, what about Sarah Nokwe? Minnie must invite her. She'll give class to the affair with her smart evening gown, and the handsome men with whom she goes to night clubs and all.

And food? What will we get to eat at the party? Mmm-m. Minnie's such a bad cook. You should hear her mistress screaming at her night after night. What dinners she must cook! If there's one thing a party needs, it's good food and drink. That Minnie never touches a drop. She's a good church woman, you see. She likes her men ... but there's never liquor in her room.

Minnie, unaware of the excitement she was causing, continued to plan her party in secret, for she had to leave out many friends, and she did not want to hurt anybody's feelings. Of course she did not want her mistress to know.

She wanted her party to be really grand, rather like those she read about in the illustrated papers. Money was her real problem. After paying her mother for the children, and giving her mistress her monthly instalment on the cast off clothes she had bought, only fifteen shillings remained of her wage of six pounds, and that was after she had told Sanna she would have to wait for the ten shillings she owed her. She hoped Pritchard would turn up. She was even prepared to ask him to the party if he had any money.

Pritchard turned up alright, exhausted, with a tremendous hangover and ... broke. He had not been to work for some days and had come home to recuperate. He had probably lost his job. When Minnie asked him for money he flew into a rage and retired to bed where he lay grumbling and smoking, and sometimes snoring, for the whole of Thursday and Friday.

The great day dawned. Minnie left Pritchard asleep and went into the kitchen early to bake a cake before her mistress got up. At noon, Pritchard, who had not been invited to the party, disappeared without a word. He left the room fetid with smoke, the floor littered with cigarette ends. The mistress still lay, stretching lazily in her pink bedroom, with the telephone almost continuously at her ear.

Minnie slipped out of the house with a basket on her arm. She was a comic figure as she hurried along with her heavy breasts dancing slowly and sensuously to the rhythm of her waddling walk and the two parts of her big bottom moving separately.

Alfred halted his whirring lawnmower, stared after her with his straw hat tilted over his eyes and spat contemplatively. Dorothy from across the road leaned too far out of the window she was cleaning and almost overbalanced.

Pieter Dhlamini, perched on a step ladder as he trimmed a hedge, was in the right position to look into her basket as Minnie returned, bustling past him without stopping for her usual chat. He called a quick inventory to Gwendoline dusting in the lounge ... a loaf of white bread, about a dozen minerals, packets of tea and biscuits, and several paper bags.

Dorothy awaited Minnie further along, standing across the path.

"Hullo, you Minnie. What's the hurry? Been shopping, I see. What can the white woman want with all those cheap drinks, eh? Is she giving a party ... er, to some Africans, perhaps?"

As she spoke Dorothy put her hand into the basket. Minnie edged away with a smile.

"Yes," she said, "these things are for the white woman. She sent me to buy them. How should I know what she wants them for? Perhaps you should ring the front door bell and ask her yourself."

Minnie tried to push past but Dorothy did not give way. The basket spilled. There was a crash and several broken bottles lay in the stone gutter with their contents trickling into a patch of thirsty sand. A packet of sweets lay strewn over the pavement, multicoloured on the brown soil. "Oh Minnie, I am sorry," said Dorothy, immediately contrite, going down on her knees. She helped pick up the sweets and threw the broken glass into the grass.

"My, I hope the white woman isn't cross," she mocked, in high spirits once again, as Minnie closed the gate behind her.

The guests began to arrive while Minnie was still washing the dinner dishes.

As each person came softly down the lane outside the kitchen window, they greeted her in hushed tones and went on to sit in her room. Minnie waited until her employers drove out of the gates on their way to the cinema, then she went eagerly down the dark garden towards the slit of light which shone between the warped boards of her door.

Sitting amid the cheerful chattering of her friends, she looked about her with a satisfied smile. Everything looked so nice. She had polished the stone floor and it glowed redly in the dull light of a candle standing in a cracked blue saucer. Her white bedspread, newly-washed, and with her big pillows propped at one end

served as a table on which she had set out the party food.

There were the sweets, multicoloured on a dish from which one of the two ornamental scrolls was broken. She had rescued the dish from the dustbin. There were sandwiches and biscuits set out on plates. In the centre was a large cake with green icing and pink roses.

Everyone settled down on the floor and on the several wooden boxes used as chairs. Conversation was lively but hushed for the white people must not be disturbed. They ate large slices of cake washed down with minerals swigged from the bottles. The room was filled with the hoarse songs of scratched gramophone records which Minnie played. She snuggled down on the floor as close as she could to Phineas who sat sensuously warm between her and Sanna. The two women pressed him so that he was barely able to lift his bottle to drink.

Emma, Minnie's sister, young and plump and smiling in her yellow dress, sat sedately beside her boy friend on a box, as befitted a couple who lived together in marriage.

Willie, the chemist's delivery man, held the stage with a fund of stories of the customers to whom he made deliveries. He was showing off to Elizabeth from the flats in town. She was a smart young lady, with a long white cigarette holder held elegantly between her fingers. She was amused by Willie's clumsy attentions and flirted with him to relieve her boredom. These people were not her type. She sighed for one, only one, of the smart young men of her social set who moved in the servants quarters of the luxury flats. How her friend Minnie had changed since she left town for a suburban house.

Old aunt Magdalena, in an ankle-length grey dress and a black doek, sat huddled in a broken grass chair which had been brought in from the garden, with a black shawl over her shoulders. She was bored too but she made no sign save for a barely concealed grimace as she swallowed a few mouthfuls of mineral water.

The music from the gramophone and the hum of happy people wafted across the garden to where Alfred stood disconsolate at the dark door of Sanna's room. The sounds from Minnie's room reminded him. Of course, Sanna was at the party.

He slipped quietly through a hole in the fence and found himself in the midst of a group of dark figures who had entered the garden from the neighbouring plots over the fences. They were moving silently save for a faint clanking towards Minnie's door.

Someone knocked and Minnie opened the door cautiously to investigate.

Samuel Phiri stood before her with a gallon of homemade beer in a tin. Dorothy from across the road had her arms around his neck. She too carried a share of liquor—most of it inside her. She wore a low-cut emerald green dress and a white turban.

“Good evening, Minnie,” shouted Samuel shaking off the encircling arms. He had a soft spot for Minnie but had never had the chance he desired. “Look, we’ve come to your wedding party.”

“Oh, Minnie,” the others shouted gaily. “Look, we’ve come to your party.” They crowded round her with their tins of liquor and some plates of food.

Within a few minutes everyone had a drink, some in cups, others in jamtins. There was no more formality. People lounged upon the crumpled bedspread. The pillows made comfortable seats upon the red floor, now littered with ash and stompies. The party overflowed into the garden and a group formed on the grass beside the room.

Minnie was frightened by this mass invasion. She begged them to keep quiet. No one listened.

“What can the white people do to us—send us to jail, if they catch us. We won’t worry. Smile, Minnie ... laugh. Here, have a cup of beer. Not drink? Nonsense, you drink it up. It’s good medicine against the white people. Come on, now ... drink!”

They stood around her in a teasing crowd which cheered loudly as she downed the first beer. It soon had an effect, and she accepted a second cup ... and then another....

Soon she was the leading spirit of the party, urging more and yet more beer on her guests.

Minnie began the first jive in the dark garden, singing in her deep voice, still dressed in her white overall and maid’s cap. She stumbled over the dust bin and clapped her hands when Pieter Dhlamini threw it over the fence into the next garden. The others joined in until the garden was filled with a dark jumble of grotesque dancers who sang and danced, and clapped and capered and whirled.

The gramophone was drowned in the frenzy.

“Pieter Dhlamini. We want Pieter Dhlamini and his guitar,” they cried. Pieter vaulted the fence and returned with his guitar. With him and dressed in a startling blue suit and a red bow tie was his friend Joe Mohale with his saxophone.

After a couple of introductory cups of beer, the little band set out to provide music for the dancers, who had not stopped at all.



Sanna stood on one side, her thin face tight with jealousy as she watched Phineas who had danced with Elizabeth throughout. They had taken to one another immediately. She had discarded her cigarette holder and danced intently with a cigarette end, from which the lighted end had been brushed, glued to her lower lip. The moving pair quite hypnotised Sanna as she strained her eyes in the dark to follow them, with the haunting fear that they would vanish into the garden. As she stood there Alfred, who had been busy quenching his great thirst, staggered up and put his arms around her.

He said, smiling at her. "Le's go t' ya room jus' now, sweetie."

They danced off into the crowd and soon stumbled across the flower beds towards the hole in the fence.

There was a sudden fanfare on the saxophone, accompanied by a furious strumming on the guitar. Aunt Magdalena stood up on her chair in the doorway, waving her arms.

"Friends," she shrieked. "Come here. Stop dancing and come over here."

A few of the dancers realised that the music had stopped and gathered round the old woman. She stood swaying slightly, bending forward from the waist, with her head on one side, as she spoke.

"Friends! I want to wish our Minnie luck. My dear niece Minnie who is now married. I remember her as a little girl sent to me by her mother who went to work.... We lived on a farm ... and then I married William.... and then...." By this time the crowd had lost interest and dwindled to nothing. The band began to play once more. The old woman looked in a bewildered way at the gaily whirling throng. She sat down and some one gave her a beer. She drank slowly, gratefully, tapping her right foot to the music and rocking gently back and forth, a smile on her wrinkled face.

As the party continued, Minnie grew wilder. She lost Samuel Phiri with whom she was dancing. He had decided to make this his night and would not let Minnie out of his sight. It was some time before she realised she was dancing alone. She weaved clumsily through the moving throng seeking Samuel, swinging her great body in erratic lunges and plunges which caused confusion among the dancers, calling him in a series of deep-voiced wails. She found him at last, whooped with joy and almost smothered him in her embrace.

As they stood together, the lights of a motor car swept the garden from the gate.



Someone shouted. "Look out! The police."

The music trailed into silence punctuated by the beat of the motor as the car moved slowly up the drive.

Dark figures hurried in all directions, avoiding the searching beams. Within a few seconds Minnie stood alone. She was confused by the glare of the headlights, puzzled at being alone.

"Samuel ... Samuel," she wailed in her deep voice.

There was no reply. The car had driven behind the house. Silence and the blackness of night enveloped ... Crunch..crunch. crunch. Someone was trudging up the drive, still near the gate.

A dark figure came towards her ... then another ...

"Is that you, Minnie?" asked the master.

"Yes, master."

"Is anything the matter?"

"No, master."

"Alright—but I thought I heard a noise as we came in the gate."

"What noise did the master hear?"

"Never mind now, Minnie. It's late. Breakfast at eight ... The master is playing golf. Do you hear me, Minnie?" The mistress sounded irritable. What was the matter with the girl! "Good night, Minnie."

"Good night, madam ... master."

Minnie walked carefully across the grass towards her room. She stumbled against a tin on the path. It overturned filling her one shoe with beer.

"Hey you, Minnie. Is that you?" Pritchard's voice sounded thick, as though he had been drinking again. He had come up the drive. "What's the matter here—a fight?"

"No ... oh nothing. Never mind". She yawned and opened her door. Someone breathed stertorously from the bed.

A match flared as Pritchard lit the candle. Aunt Magdalena lay asleep in the bed.

Pritchard stumbled towards Minnie. As he caught her, she fell with him on to the pillows on the floor.

The candle flickered and smoked in the blue saucer.