

1

The boy heard it first. The call of an owl. The second time it hooted, the two men on the track in front of him stopped and stood as still as tree trunks. They did this, the boy knew, because the call of an owl could mean something else.

Sometimes, at night in the bush, these were the sounds men made to signal to each other. Men all searching for the same thing.

His legs felt like lead. The axe he carried across his shoulders was heavy, and his neck ached. He was thirsty too but knew he would have to wait. Only when their leader felt it was safe would he be able to take the Coke bottle filled with water out of his backpack and have a drink. He hoped that would be soon. Daylight was not their friend. The same call came again, but this time, the owl swept down over their heads. The boy jumped. Nearly called out. Moamba clicked his tongue, and they moved forward.

The boy did not know what the leader's real name was. The other man called him Moamba because he came from Mozambique.

Another half an hour went by before Moamba stopped.

The bush was thick, and the boy's arms and legs were covered in scratches.

"We will camp here," Moamba said. "Eat and sleep. But first, you must hide that." He nodded towards the sack carried on the shoulders of the man the boy called Lebadi. The boy called him that because of the scar on his cheek. Lebadi eased the hessian sack off his shoulders and let it fall heavily onto the ground. A frenzy of flies rose from the sack, and the stench made the boy feel sick.

Moamba placed the hunting rifle he had been carrying against a tree trunk. He pointed and said to the boy, "Dig there under that tree, moshanyana. Not too deep."

The boy took the axe from his shoulders and walked over to the spot Moamba had pointed out. He began to hack away at the soft, dry sand. An axe was not the best tool for the job, but it was all they had. When it was deep enough, he and Lebadi hauled the sack over to the hollowed-out ground and dropped it in. Then they covered it with sand and branches.

Once the task was complete, the boy opened his backpack and pulled out the Coke bottle, which he handed to Moamba. Then he took out a loaf of bread, a can of pilchards and another of baked beans.

Moamba drank some of the water and then handed the bottle to Lebadi. It was only after Lebadi had finished drinking that the boy was able to drink the last bit of water in the bottle.

Lebadi opened the cans with his knife. Then the men and

the boy took turns in tearing off chunks of bread and scooping out the fish and beans.

The boy did not know when he would next get a chance to eat, so he crammed the food into his mouth. Even though he could still smell what was in the sack. Even though it made him feel sick.

The smell of death.