

Maggie and the unwelcome torpedo

Problems lay ahead. Making a U-turn at the end of the road I caught a glimpse of Missus Mkhize emerging from her very neat driveway lined with the orange, yellow, green and red colours of early Spring. We slowed our pace. Mrs Mkhize was frowning and there were likely to be some awkward questions. But there was also no escape. From the end of the cul-de-sac, it was perhaps 400 metres to her home and her horticultural marvels. Side roads, lanes, and the park (Maggie's favourite part of our brief journey because she was allowed to run free) were well past her. My heart quickened, not because of the hill, but the approaching inquisition. Maggie, such was her confidence, was more at ease. As she had done before, she adopted a more upright posture and affected trot. She also knew what was to come. We had all been through this before.

Missus Mkhize was preparing for a morning of sculpting the garden on her sidewalk. But there was something puzzling her. Hands-on-hips she was surveying her lawn. The tinges of green would normally have pleased her, but there was something else that had caught her attention. Her frown and pursed lips were now focussed on the bed of azaleas and rhododendrons whose stalks were already bright green, filled with buds and small flowers knowing that the Spring rains would soon be here. We approached.

"Morning Missus Mkhize" I said, sounding as friendly as I could, "beautiful day, isn't it?" But she was in no mood for the usual exchange.

"I don't suppose you know anything about this?" she enquired with a peremptory nod at the azaleas.

"What's that?", I mustered a frown of my own.

"There! Look," she asserted, pointing directly at the offending object.

"Oh dear," I commiserated, bending forward to show my solidarity with her outrage at this development. "How awful, and just as you were preparing for a morning of gardening. Very inconsiderate."

"Indeed," she turned to face me, quizzical but suspicious. "Hmmm, have you seen any dogs around? That looks recent". She was, of course, correct. The unwelcome torpedo glistened in the morning sun.

"Er, possibly. I did hear some barking earlier but I'm not sure," I floundered, "are you sure it's from a dog?"

"Well it can't be from a rabbit, can it?" she scoffed, "and the only dog I see around is this one". Maggie took a step back. She looked as indignant as she dared, maintaining a wide-eyed gaze.

"Oh, it can't be her", I protested, "I would surely have noticed."

"Yes, you surely would have." Her lips were pursed once again. There was an awkward pause in our conversation, neither of us knowing what to say next.

"It does look like it may have come from a large-ish dog," I offered a potential new line of enquiry out of the stalemate. Maggie took a step forward, obligingly parading her small frame, inspected the parcel and was about to offer an opinion when Missus Mkhize cut us short.

"I shall be bringing this up at the next resident's association meeting," she informed me, "and I do hope your father will be there". Missus Mkhize understood children. She had been a teacher at my school before retiring to a life of gardening and was in no mood for discussions.

"I will ask him to attend, I am sure he will want to support any efforts to keep this neighbourhood clean and tidy. He's a policeman you know?"

"Yes, I do remember, so you keep saying".

More silence.

"I best be getting home, we going to cricket practice and Dad won't want me to be late." I smiled shyly and turned. I was thankful for the open road ahead.

"Just a minute young man," she called.

"Yes, Missus Mkhize?"

“You do still attend the ‘moral living’ classes at school?” she asked with a wry smile, “I spent hours of preparation on those lessons. They especially designed for the proper development of young men, and I would hate for you to miss out.”

“I always do, ma’am,” I was falling into schoolboy mode, “um, actually it’s one of my favourite subjects.”

“Good,” she smiled, “well keep it up then, I’ll find out from Miss Davenport how you’re coming along”.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Missus Mkhize had turned to inspect the unwelcome torpedo again. It winked at her from between the flowers as Maggie pulled at the leash, and we set off.