

# WHEN RAIN CLOUDS GATHER



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South Africa, 1937-1986

# **When Rain Clouds Gather**

1969, EN, Botswana

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The poverty-stricken village of Golema Mmidi, in the heart of rural Botswana, is a haven to the exiles gathered there. When a political refugee from South Africa joins forces with an English agricultural expert, the time-honoured subsistence farming is challenged.

# Foreword

**BESSIE HEAD**, one of Africa's best-known women writers, was born in South Africa in 1937, the result of an 'illicit' union between a black man and a white woman. Her life was a traumatic one, and she drew heavily upon her own experiences for her novels. She was looked after by a foster family until she was thirteen, and then attended a mission school. She trained as a teacher. After four years' teaching she took a job as a journalist for *Drum* magazine, but an unsuccessful marriage and her involvement in the trial of a friend led her to apply for a teaching post in Botswana, where she took up permanent exile. Her precarious refugee status lasted fifteen years until she was granted Botswanan citizenship in 1979.

Botswana is the backdrop for all three of her novels. *When Rain Clouds Gather*, her first novel, based on her time as a refugee living at the Bamangwato Development Farm, was published in 1969. This was followed by *Maru* (1971) and the intense and powerful autobiographical work *A Question of Power* (1974). Her short stories appeared as *The Collector of Treasures* in 1977, and in 1981 *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* was published, a historical portrait of a hundred years of a community in Botswana.

Bessie Head died in 1986, aged 49. *A Woman Alone*, a collection of autobiographical writings, *Tales of Tenderness and Power* and *The Cardinals* were published posthumously.

## **Note**

Botswana is the name of the country;

The Batswana are the Tswana people who live there;

A Motswana is an individual member of the Tswana tribe.

# One

The little Barolong village swept right up to the border fence. One of the huts was built so close that a part of its circular wall touched the barbed-wire fencing. In this hut a man had been sitting since the early hours of dawn. He was waiting until dark when he would try to spring across the half-mile gap of no-man's-land to the Botswana border fence and then on to whatever illusion of freedom lay ahead. It was June and winter and bitterly cold, and his legs were too long to allow for pacing in the cramped space of the hut. Every half hour the patrol van of the South African border police sped past with sirens wailing, and this caused an unpleasant sensation in his stomach.

I'll soon have a stomach-ache if I go on like this, he thought.

His nerves weren't so good, too easily jangled by the irritations of living. In fact, the inner part of him was a jumble of chaotic discord, very much belied by his outer air of calm, lonely self-containment. The only way you could sense this inner discord was through a trick he had of slightly averting his face as though no man was his brother or worthy of trust. Otherwise, his face was rather pleasing to the eye. It was often wryly amused. Its general expression was one of absorbed, attentive listening. His long thin falling-away cheekbones marked him as a member of either the Xhosa or Zulu tribe.

Towards noon, when there was a lull in the wailing sirens, the old man who owned the hut pushed open the door, letting in a shaft of sunlight. He held in his hands a steaming bowl of thick porridge. The man by now had a dreadful stomach-ache, and the sight of the food did not immediately please him.

"Well, how are you, son?" the old man asked.

"I'm all right," the man lied. It did not seem quite dignified to admit that he had stomach trouble.

"I've brought you a little food," the old man said.

“Thank you,” the man said. “But could I go out for a while and stretch my legs?” He had to ease the painful knots in his stomach.

“It’s not safe,” the old man said, “I can’t guarantee who may or may not be a spy. Once you are caught here it will make it unsafe for those who come on behind. I would no doubt go to jail too.”

The young man was bent over the hand-carved stool on which he sat, and the old man thought he might be cold.

“Why not take a little brandy?” he asked sympathetically. “I know a place nearby, and I can send for some if you want it.”

The man looked up, relieved, and nodded his head. He took out a pound note and handed it to the old man. The old man smiled widely. He had not known of one fugitive yet who did not need it. Besides, with a little brandy inside they soon became talkative, and he liked all the stories. He stored them up against the day when he would be free to surprise his village with his vast fund of information on fugitives. He closed the door and shuffled away. A dog barked nearby. There was the chatter of women’s voices, and music and singing. A child began to cry loudly. Men laughed, and the man in the hut was briefly surprised that a whole village could live in the wail of those sirens that had tied his stomach in such tight knots. Soon the old man shuffled back again. Because relief was near at hand he noticed how the dust of the mud floor rose up and shimmered and danced in the sunlight as the old man pushed open the door. The old man had not only the brandy but a bowl of food for himself, as well. It pleased the young man in the shadows that he did not close the door because as soon as he had taken a few careful sips from the bottle, he could clearly discern the gentle, interweaving dance pattern of the sunlit dust. The slow, almost breathless rhythm eased away the knots of stomach trouble, and he unconsciously smiled to himself in this sudden warm glow of expansive relief that was now his abdomen.

Noting this the old man said, “I say, son, what’s your name?”

“Makhaya,” the young man replied.

The old man screwed up his eyes, perplexed. The sound and meaning of the name were unfamiliar to him. Tswana-speaking tribes dominated the northern Transvaal.

“I don’t know it,” the old man said, shaking his head.

“It’s Zulu,” the young man said, “I’m a Zulu.” And he laughed sarcastically at the thought of calling himself a Zulu.

“But you speak Tswana fluently,” the old man persisted.

Quite drunk by now the young man said rather crazily, “Yes, we Zulus are like that. Since the days of Shaka we’ve assumed that the whole world belongs to us; that’s why we trouble to learn any man’s language. But look here, old man, I’m no tribalist. My parents are – that’s why they saddled me with this foolish name. Why not call me Samuel or Johnson, because I’m no tribalist.”

“Jo!” said the old man, using a Tswana expression of surprise. “And what’s wrong with the tribe?”

“I have a list of grievances against it. I haven’t got time to go into them now...” He paused, trying to collect his thoughts in the haze of brandy that was clouding his brain. “Makhaya,” he said. “That tribal name is the wrong one for me. It is for one who stays home, yet they gave it to me and I have not known a day’s peace and contentment in my life.”

“It’s because of education,” the old man said, nodding his head wisely. “They should not have given you the education. Take away the little bit of education and you will be only too happy to say, ‘Mama, please find me a tribal girl and let us plough.’ It’s only the education that turns a man away from his tribe.”

The conversation threatened to become a vast, meaningless, rambling digression. Good storyteller that he was, the old man brought it back to the main points at hand. Why was the young man here? What was he fleeing from? A jail sentence, perhaps?

The young man looked at him suspiciously, “I’m just out of jail,” he said. He closed the brandy bottle and picked up the bowl of porridge. And then some anxiety seemed to jolt him for he put the bowl down again, searched the inside pocket of his coat, and took out a little scrap of paper. He struck a match and burned the paper. Then he picked up the bowl of porridge and would not utter another word. The old man was left to put two and two together. Perhaps scraps of paper and jail sentences were the same thing in the young man’s mind. Why did he jump so at the thought of one tiny scrap? And what was this about tribalism? What about the white man who was the only recognized enemy of everyone?

“Oh, so you have no complaints about the white man?” the old man said, struggling to pry some information out of the tightly shut mouth.

The young man only turned his face slightly, yet the light of laughter danced in his eyes.

“Ha, I see now,” the old man said, pretending disappointment. “You are running away from tribalism. But just ahead of you is the worst tribal country in the world. We Barolongs are neighbours of the Batswana, but we cannot get along with them. They are a thick-headed lot who think no further than this door. Tribalism is meat and drink to them.”

The young man burst out laughing. “Oh, Papa,” he said. “I just want to step on free ground. I don’t care about people. I don’t care about anything, not even the white man. I want to feel what it is like to live in a free country and then maybe some of the evils in my life will correct themselves.”

The wail of the approaching sirens sounded again. After they had swept past, the old man left the hut, closing the door behind him. Makhaya was left alone with his thoughts, and since these threatened to trouble him, he kept on numbing them with a little brandy sipped straight from the bottle.

The sun set early in winter and by seven o’clock it was pitch dark. Makhaya made ready to cross the patch of no-man’s-land. The two border fences were seven-foot-high barriers of close, tautly drawn barbed wire. He waited in the hut until he heard the patrol van pass. Then he removed his heavy overcoat and stuffed it into a large leather bag. He stepped out of the hut and pitched the leather bag over the fence, grasped hold of the barbed wire, and heaved himself up and over. Picking up his bag, he ran as fast as he could across the path of ground to the other fence, where he repeated the performance. Then he was in Botswana.

In his anxiety to get as far away from the border as fast as possible, he hardly felt the intense, penetrating cold of the frosty night. For almost half an hour he sped, blind and deaf and numbed to anything but his major fear. The wail of the siren brought him to an abrupt halt. It sounded shockingly near and he feared that his crashing pace would draw attention to himself. But the lights of the patrol van swept past and he knew, from timing the patrols throughout the long torturous day, that he had another half hour of safety ahead of him. As he relaxed a little, his mind grasped the fact that he had been sucking in huge gulps of frozen air and that his lungs were flaming with pain. He removed the heavy coat from the bag and put it on.

He also took a few careful sips from the brandy bottle and then continued on his way at a more leisurely pace.

He had not walked more than a few paces when he again came to an abrupt halt. The air was full of the sound of bells, thousands and thousands of bells, tinkling and tinkling with a purposeful, monotonous rhythm. Yet there was not a living thing in sight to explain where the sound was coming from. He was quite sure that around him and in front of him were trees and more trees, thorn trees that each time he approached too near ripped at his clothes. But how to explain the bells, unearthly sounding bells in an apparently unlivable wasteland?

Oh, God, I'm going crazy, he thought.

He looked up at the stars. They winked back at him, silently, blandly. He could even make out some of the star patterns of the southern constellations. Surely, if his mind was suddenly disordered through the tensions of the day, the stars would appear disordered too? Surely everything became mixed up to a person who had just lost his mind? He shook his head, but the bells continued their monotonous, rhythmic tinkling. He knew some pretty horrifying stories about tribal societies and their witch doctors who performed their ghoulish rites by night. But witch doctors were human, and nothing, however odd and perverse, need be feared if it was human. Taking this as a possible explanation of the bells restored his balance, and he continued on his way, keeping an alert eye open for the fires or huts of the witch doctors.

Soon he saw a fire in the bush, a small bit of self-contained light in the overwhelming darkness. He headed straight for it, and as he approached, the flickering, crackling light outlined the shape of two mud huts and the forms of a woman and a child. It was the woman who looked up as she became aware of approaching footsteps. He stood still, not wishing to alarm her. She appeared to be very old. Her small eyes were completely sunk in the wrinkles of her face. The child was a girl of about ten who kept her head bent, idly drawing a pattern with a stick on the ground. He greeted the old woman in Tswana, politely calling her mother in a quiet, reassuring voice.

She did not return the greeting. Instead she demanded, "Yes, what do you want?" She had a loud, shrill, uncontrolled voice, and he disliked her immediately.

"I was looking for shelter for the night," he said.