

# 1 HITTING BUDAPEST

We are on our way to Budapest: Bastard and Chipo and Godknows and Sbho and Stina and me. We are going even though we are not allowed to cross Mzilikazi Road, even though Bastard is supposed to be watching his little sister Fraction, even though Mother would kill me dead if she found out; we are just going. There are guavas to steal in Budapest, and right now I'd rather die for guavas. We didn't eat this morning and my stomach feels like somebody just took a shovel and dug everything out.

Getting out of Paradise is not so hard since the mothers are busy with hair and talk, which is the only thing they ever do. They just glance at us when we file past the shacks

and then look away. We don't have to worry about the men under the jacaranda either since their eyes never lift from the draughts. It's only the little kids who see us and try to follow, but Bastard just wallops the naked one at the front with a fist on his big head and they all turn back.

When we hit the bush we are already flying, screaming like the wheels in our voices will make us go faster. Sbhho leads: *Who discovered the way to India?* and the rest of us rejoin, *Vasco da Gama! Vasco da Gama! Vasco da Gama!* Bastard is at the front because he won country-game today and he thinks that makes him our president or something, and then myself and Godknows, Stina, Sbhho, and finally Chipso, who used to outrun everybody in all of Paradise but not anymore because somebody made her pregnant.

After crossing Mzilikazi we cut through another bush, zip right along Hope Street for a while before we cruise past the big stadium with the glimmering benches we'll never sit on, and finally we hit Budapest. We have to stop once, though, for Chipso to sit down because of her stomach; sometimes when it gets painful she has to rest it.

When is she going to have the baby anyway? Bastard says. Bastard doesn't like it when we have to stop doing things because of Chipso's stomach. He even tried to get us not to play with her altogether.

She'll have it one day, I say, speaking for Chipso because she doesn't talk anymore. She is not mute-mute; it's just that when her stomach started showing, she stopped talking. But she still plays with us and does everything else,

and if she really, really needs to say something she'll use her hands.

What's one day? On Thursday? Tomorrow? Next week?

Can't you see her stomach is still small? The baby has to grow.

A baby grows *outside* of the stomach, not inside. That's the whole reason they are born. So they grow into adults.

Well, it's not time yet. That's why it's still in a stomach.

Is it a boy or girl?

It's a boy. The first baby is supposed to be a boy.

But you're a girl, big head, and you're a first-born.

I said *supposed*, didn't I?

Just shut your kaka mouth, you, it's not even your stomach.

I think it's a girl. I put my hands on it all the time and I've never felt it kick, not even once.

Yes, boys kick and punch and butt their heads. That's all they are good at.

Does she want a boy?

No. Yes. Maybe. I don't know.

Where exactly does a baby come out of?

The same place it goes into the stomach.

How exactly does it get into the stomach?

First, Jesus's mother has to put it in there.

No, not Jesus's mother. A man has to put it in there, my cousin Musa told me. Well, she was really telling Enia, and I was there so I heard.

Then who put it inside her?

How can we know if she won't say?

Who put it in there, Chipo? Tell us, we won't tell.

Chipo looks at the sky. There's a tear in her one eye, but it's only a small one.

Then if a man put it in there, why doesn't he take it out?

Because it's women who give birth, you dunderhead. That's why they have breasts to suckle the baby and everything.

But Chipo's breasts are small. Like stones.

It doesn't matter. They'll grow when the baby comes. Let's go, can we go, Chipo? I say. Chipo doesn't reply, she just takes off, and we run after her. When we get right to the middle of Budapest we stop. This place is not like Paradise, it's like being in a different country altogether. A nice country where people who are not like us live. But then you don't see anything to show there are real people living here; even the air itself is empty: no delicious food cooking, no odors, no sounds. Just nothing.

Budapest is big, big houses with satellite dishes on the roofs and neat graveled yards or trimmed lawns, and the tall fences and the Durawalls and the flowers and the big trees heavy with fruit that's waiting for us since nobody around here seems to know what to do with it. It's the fruit that gives us courage, otherwise we wouldn't dare be here. I keep expecting the clean streets to spit and tell us to go back where we came from.

At first we used to steal from Stina's uncle, who now lives

in Britain, but that was not stealing-stealing because it was Stina's uncle's tree and not a stranger's. There's a difference. But then we finished all the guavas in that tree so we have moved to the other houses as well. We have stolen from so many houses I cannot even count. It was Bastard who decided that we pick a street and stay on it until we have gone through all the houses. Then we go to the next street. This is so we don't confuse where we have been with where we are going. It's like a pattern, and Bastard says this way we can be better thieves.

Today we are starting a new street and so we are carefully scouting around. We are passing Chimurenga Street, where we've already harvested every guava tree, maybe like two-three weeks ago, when we see white curtains part and a face peer from a window of the cream home with the marble statue of the urinating naked boy with wings. We are standing and staring, looking to see what the face will do, when the window opens and a small, funny voice shouts for us to stop. We remain standing, not because the voice told us to stop, but because none of us has started to run, and also because the voice doesn't sound dangerous. Music pours out of the window onto the street; it's not kwaito, it's not dance-hall, it's not house, it's not anything we know.

A tall, thin woman opens the door and comes out of the house. The first thing we see is that she is eating something. She waves as she walks towards us, and already we can tell from the woman's thinness that we are not even going to

run. We wait, so we can see what she is smiling for, or at. The woman stops by the gate; it's locked, and she didn't bring the keys to open it.

Jeez, I can't stand this awful heat, and the hard earth, how do you guys ever do it? the woman asks in her not-dangerous voice. She smiles, takes a bite of the thing in her hand. A pink camera dangles from her neck. We all look at the woman's feet peeking underneath her long skirt. They are clean and pretty feet, like a baby's. She is wiggling her toes, purple from nail polish. I don't remember my own feet ever looking like that; maybe when I was born.

Then there's the woman's red chewing mouth. I can tell from the cord thingies at the side of her neck and the way she smacks her big lips that whatever she is eating tastes really good. I look closely at her long hand, at the thing she is eating. It's flat, and the outer part is crusty. The top is creamish and looks fluffy and soft, and there are coin-like things on it, a deep pink, the color of burn wounds. I also see sprinkles of red and green and yellow, and finally the brown bumps that look like pimples.

Chipo points at the thing and keeps jabbing at the air in a way that says *What's that?* She rubs her stomach with her other hand; now that she is pregnant, Chipo is always playing with her stomach like maybe it's a toy. The stomach is the size of a football, not too big. We keep our eyes on the woman's mouth and wait to hear what she will say.

Oh, this? It's a camera, the woman says, which we all

know; even a stone can tell that a camera is a camera. The woman wipes her hand on her skirt, pats the camera, then aims what is left of the thing at the bin by the door, misses, and laughs to herself like a madman. She looks at us like maybe she wants us to laugh with her, but we are busy looking at the thing that flew in the air before hitting the ground like a dead bird. We have never ever seen anyone throw food away, even if it's a thing. Chipo looks like she wants to run after it and pick it up. The woman's twisted mouth finishes chewing, and swallows. I swallow with her, my throat tingling.

How old are you? the woman asks Chipo, looking at her stomach like she has never seen anybody pregnant.

She is eleven, Godknows replies for Chipo. We are ten, me and her, like twinses, Godknows says, meaning him and me. And Bastard is eleven and Sbho is nine, and Stina we don't know because he has no birth certificate.

Wow, the woman says. I say wow too, wow wow wow, but I do it inside my head. It's my first time ever hearing this word. I try to think what it means but I get tired of grinding my brains so I just give up.

And how old are you? Godknows asks her. And where are you from? I'm thinking about how Godknows has a big mouth that will get him slapped one day.

Me? Well, I'm thirty-three, and I'm from London. This is my first time visiting my dad's country, she says, and twists the chain on her neck. The golden head on the chain is the map of Africa.

I know London. I ate some sweets from there once. They were sweet at first, and then they just changed to sour in my mouth. Uncle Vusa sent them when he first got there but that was a long time ago. Now he never sends anything, Godknows says. He looks up at the sky like maybe he wants a plane to appear with sweets from his uncle.

But you look only fifteen, like a child, Godknows says, looking at the woman now. I am expecting her to reach out and slap him on the mouth but she merely smiles like she has not just been insulted.

Thank you, I just came off the Jesus diet, she says, sounding very pleased. I look at her like *What is there to thank?* I'm also thinking, *What is a Jesus diet, and do you mean the real Jesus, like God's child?*

I know from everybody's faces and silence that they think the woman is strange. She runs a hand through her hair, which is matted and looks a mess; if I lived in Budapest I would wash my whole body every day and comb my hair nicely to show I was a real person living in a real place. With her hair all wild like that, and standing on the other side of the gate with its lock and bars, the woman looks like a caged animal. I begin thinking what I would do if she actually jumped out and came after us.

Do you guys mind if I take a picture? she says. We don't answer because we're not used to adults asking us anything; we just look at the woman, at her fierce hair, at her skirt that sweeps the ground when she walks, at her pretty peeking feet, at her golden Africa, at her large eyes, at her smooth



skin that doesn't even have a scar to show she is a living person, at the earring in her nose, at her T-shirt that says Save Darfur.

Great, now, stand close together, the woman says.

You, the tall one, go to the back. And you, yes, you, and you, look this way, no, I mean you, with the missing teeth, look at me, like this, she says, her hands reaching out of the bars, almost touching us.

Good, good, now say *cheese*, say *cheese*, *cheese*, *cheeeeeeeese*—the woman enthuses, and everyone says *cheese*. Myself, I don't really say, because I am busy trying to remember what *cheese* means exactly, and I cannot remember. Yesterday Mother of Bones told us the story of Dudu the bird who learned and sang a new song whose words she did not really know the meaning of and who was then caught, killed, and cooked for dinner because in the song she was actually begging people to kill and cook her.

The woman points at me, nods, and tells me to say *cheeeeeese* and I say it mostly because she is smiling like she knows me really well, like she even knows my mother. I say it slowly at first, and then I say, *Cheese* and *cheese*, and I'm saying *cheese cheeeeeese* and everyone is saying *cheese cheese cheese* and we are all singing the word and the camera is clicking and clicking and clicking. Then Stina, who is quiet most of the time, just starts to walk away. The woman stops taking pictures and says, Hey, where are you going? But he doesn't stop, doesn't even turn to look at her. Then Chipu walks away after Stina, then the rest of us follow them.

We leave the woman standing there, taking pictures as we go. Then Bastard stops at the corner of Victoria and starts shouting insults at the woman, and I remember the thing, and that she threw it away without even asking us if we wanted it, and I begin shouting also, and everyone else joins in. We shout and we shout and we shout; we want to eat the thing she was eating, we want to hear our voices soar, we want our hunger to go away. The woman just looks at us puzzled, like she has never heard anybody shout, and then quickly hurries back into the house but we shout after her, shout till we smell blood in our tickling throats.

Bastard says when we grow up we'll stop stealing guavas and move on to bigger things inside the houses. I'm not really worried about that because when that time comes, I'll not even be here; I'll be living in America with Aunt Fostalina, eating real food and doing better things than stealing. But for now, the guavas. We decide on Robert Street, on a huge white house that looms like a mountain. The house has big windows and sparkling things all over, and a red swimming pool at the front, empty chairs all around it. Everything looks really pretty, but I think it's the kind of pretty to look at and admire and say, Oh, that's pretty, not a pretty to live in.

The good thing is that the house is set far back in the yard, and our guavas are right at the front, as if they heard we were coming and ran out to meet us. It doesn't take long to climb over the Durawall, get into the tree, and fill our plastic bags. Today we are stealing bull guavas. These ones

are big, like a man's angry fist, and do not really ripen to yellow like the regular guavas; they stay green on the outside, pink and fluffy on the inside, and taste so good I cannot even explain it.

Going back to Paradise, we do not run. We just walk nicely like Budapest is now our country too, like we built it even, eating guavas along the way and spitting the peels all over to make the place dirty. We stop at the corner of AU Street for Chipu to vomit; it happens most of the time she eats. Today her vomit looks like urine, only thicker. We leave it there, uncovered.

One day I will live here, in a house just like that, Sbho says, biting into a thick guava. She points to the big blue house with the long row of steps, flowers all around it. A really nice house, but not nicer than where we just got the guavas. Sbho's voice sounds like she is not playing, like she knows what she is talking about. I watch her chew, her cheeks bulging. She swallows, starts to peel what is left of the guava with her side teeth.

How are you going to do that? I ask. Sbho spits the peels and says, with her big eyes, I just know it.

She is going to do it in her dreams, Bastard says to the sun, and throws a guava at the Durawall of Sbho's house. The guava explodes and stains the wall. I bite into a sweet guava; I don't like grinding the bull guava seeds, because they are tough and it takes a long time to do, so I grind them just slightly, sometimes swallow them whole even

though I know what will happen later when I'm squatting.

Why did you do that? Sbho looks at the stained Durawall of her house, and then at Bastard. Her face has turned ugly now, like a real woman's.

I said, why did you do that? Sbho's voice has hot coals in it, like maybe she will do something to Bastard, but really she won't because Bastard is bigger and stronger, plus he is a boy. He has beaten Sbho before, and myself, and Chipo and Godknows as well; he has beaten us all except Stina.

Because I can, kiss-knees. Besides, what does it matter? Bastard says.

Because you just heard me say I like the house, so you are not supposed to do anything to it. Why don't you pick another that I don't care about, they're many houses here! Sbho says.

Well, that doesn't make it your house, does it? Bastard wears black tracksuit bottoms and a faded orange T-shirt that says Cornell. Now he takes the top off, ties it over his head, and I don't know if it makes him look ugly or pretty, if he really looks like a man or a woman. He turns and starts walking backwards so he can face Sbho. He always likes whoever he is quarreling with to look right at him.

Budapest is not a kaka toilet for anybody to just walk in, it's not like Paradise. You'll never live here, he says.

I'm going to marry a man from Budapest. He'll take me away from Paradise, away from the shacks and Heavenway and Fambeki and everything else, Sbho says.

Ha-ha. You think a man will marry you with your missing teeth? I wouldn't even marry you myself, Godknows says, shouting over his skinny shoulder. He and Chipo and Stina walk ahead of us. I look at Godknows's shorts, torn at the back, at his buttocks peeping like strange eyes through the dirty white fabric.

I'm not talking to you, chapped buttocks! Sbho shouts at Godknows. Besides, my teeth will grow back. Mother says I'll even be more beautiful too!

Godknows flings his hand and makes a whatever sign because he has nothing to say to that. Even the stones know that Sbho is pretty, prettier than all of us here, prettier than all the children in Paradise. Sometimes we refuse to play with her if she won't stop talking like we don't already know it.

Well, I don't care, I'm blazing out of this kaka country myself. Then I'll make lots of money and come back and get a house in this very Budapest. Or even better, many houses: one in Budapest, one in Los Angeles, one in Paris. Wherever I feel like, Bastard says.

When we were going to school my teacher Mr. Gono said you need an education to make money, Stina says, stopping to face Bastard. And how will you do that now that we are not going to school anymore? he adds. Stina doesn't say much, so when he opens his mouth you know it's important talk.

I don't need any kaka school to make money, you goat-teeth, Bastard says.

He brings his face close to Stina's like he will bite his nose off. Stina can fight Bastard if he wants, but he only looks at him like he is bored and just eats the rest of his guava. Then he starts to walk, fast, away from us.

I'm going to America to live with my aunt Fostalina, it won't be long, you'll see, I say, raising my voice so they can all hear. I start on a brand-new guava; it's so sweet I finish it in just three bites. I don't even bother chewing the seeds.

America is too far, you midget, Bastard says. I don't want to go anywhere where I have to go by air. What if you get there and find it's a kaka place and get stuck and can't come back? Me, I'm going to Jo'burg, that way when things get bad, I can just get on the road and roll without talking to anybody; you have to be able to return from wherever you go.

I look at Bastard and think what to say to him. A guava seed is stuck between my gum and my last side tooth and I try to reach for it with my tongue. I finally use my finger; it tastes like earwax.

Yes, America is far, what if something happens to your plane when you are in it?

What about the Terrorists? Godknows says, agreeing with Bastard.

I really think flat-face, peeping-buttocks Godknows is only saying it to please ugly-face Bastard. I begin on a new guava and give Godknows a talking eye.

I don't care, I'm going, I say, and walk fast to catch up with Chipó and Stina because I know where the talk will end if Godknows and Bastard gang up on me.

Well, go, go to that America and work in nursing homes. That's what your aunt Fostalina is doing as we speak. Right now she is busy cleaning kaka off some wrinkled old man who can't do anything for himself, you think we've never heard the stories? Bastard screams to my back but I just keep walking.

I'm thinking how if I had proper strength I would turn right around and beat Bastard up for saying that about my aunt Fostalina and my America. I would slap him, butt him on his big forehead, and then slam my fist into his mouth and make him spit his teeth. I would pound his stomach until he vomited all the guavas he had eaten. I would pin him to the ground, jab my knee into his spine, fold his hands behind him, and then pull his head back till he begged for his two-cents life. That is just what I would do, but I walk away instead. I know he is just saying this because he is jealous. Because he has nobody in America. Because Aunt Fostalina is not his aunt. Because he is Bastard and I am Darling.

By the time we get back to Paradise the guavas are finished and our stomachs are so full we are almost crawling. We stop to defecate in the bush because we have eaten too much. Plus it is best to do so before it gets too dark, otherwise no one will accompany you; it's scary to go out by yourself at night because you have to pass Heavenway, which is the cemetery, to get to the bush and you might meet a ghost. As we speak, those who know about things say Moses's father, who died last month, can be seen roam-

ing Paradise some nights, wearing his yellow Barcelona football jersey.

We all find places, and me, I squat behind a rock. This is the worst part about guavas; because of all those seeds, you get constipated once you eat too much. Nobody says it, but I know we are constipated again, all of us, because nobody is trying to talk, or get up and leave. We just eat a lot of guavas because it's the only way to kill our hunger, and when it comes to defecating, we get in so much pain it becomes an almost impossible task, like you are trying to give birth to a country.

We are all squatting like that, in our different places, and I'm beating my thighs with fists to make a cramp go away when somebody screams. It's not a scream that comes from when you push too hard and a guava seed cuts your anus; it's one that says *Come and see*, so I stop pushing, pull up my underwear, and abandon my rock. And there, squatting and screaming, is Chipó. She is also pointing ahead in the bush, and we see it, a tall thing dangling in a tree like a strange fruit. Then we see it's not a thing but a person. Then we see it's not just a person but a woman.

What's that? somebody whispers. Nobody answers because now we can all see what it is. The thin woman dangles from a green rope that's attached to a branch high up in the tree. The red sun squeezes through the leaves and gives everything a strange color; it's almost beautiful, it makes the woman's light skin glow. But still everything is just scary and I want to run but I don't want to run alone.



The woman's thin arms hang limp at the sides, and her hands and feet point to the ground. Everything straight, like somebody drew her there, a line hanging in the air. The eyes are the scariest part, they are almost too white, and they look like they want to pop out. The mouth is open wide in an O, as if the woman was maybe interrupted in the middle of saying something. She is wearing a yellow dress, and the grass licks the tip of her red shoes. We just stand there staring.

Let's run, Stina says, and I get ready to run.

Can't you see she's hanged herself and now she's dead? Bastard picks up a stone and throws; it hits the woman on the thigh. I think something will happen but then nothing happens; the woman does not move, just her dress. It swings ever so lightly in the breeze like maybe a baby angel is busy playing with it.

See, I told you she's dead, Bastard says, in that voice he uses when he is reminding us who is the boss.

God will punish you for that, Godknows says. Bastard throws another stone and hits the woman on the leg. The woman still does not move; she just dangles there, like a ragged doll. I'm terrified; it's like she's looking at me from the corner of her white, popped eye. Looking and waiting for me to do something, I don't know what.

God does not live here, fool, Bastard says. He throws another stone; it only grazes the woman's yellow dress and I am glad he missed.

I'll go and tell my mother, Sbho says, her voice sounding

like she wants to cry. Stina starts to leave, and Chipo and Sbho and Godknows and myself follow him. Bastard stays behind for a little while, but when I look over my shoulder, I see him right there behind us. I know he can't stay in the bush by himself with a dead woman, even though he wants to make like he is fearless. We walk, but then Bastard jumps to the front, making us stop.

Wait, so who wants real bread? he says, tightening the Cornell T-shirt on his head and smiling. I look at the wound on Bastard's chest, just below his left breast. It's almost pink, like the inside of a guava.

Where is it? I say.

Look, did you notice that woman's shoes were almost new? If we can get them then we can sell them and buy a loaf, or maybe even one and a half.

We all turn around and follow Bastard back into the bush, the dizzying smell of Lobels bread all around us now, and then we are rushing, then we are running, then we are running and laughing and laughing and laughing.