

# The Haunting

## Michael Stanley

The car that pulled up in front of Makanya's house was a black 3-series BMW. It wasn't new, and grey smoke clouded from the exhaust, but it was a BMW. Makanya, who was drinking water with ice in the shade of his veranda, was immediately interested.

The driver was a big man, dressed in a pressed white shirt with the sleeves rolled up against the Zululand summer humidity and slacks that looked as though they were part of a suit. He was carrying three hard-cover binders with the words Ledger, Journal, and Cash Book in gold lettering on the covers. Makanya hoped he wasn't from the government. With a sigh, he stood up and greeted the visitor.

'My name is Ndumu,' the man said. 'Peter Ndumu. I own the A1 Luxury Motor Company. Best second-hand vehicles.' He sniffed, catching the whiff of exhaust fumes. 'It needs new rings. Otherwise it's fine.'

'That's probably right,' said Makanya, who knew nothing about vehicles. Surely the man wasn't trying to sell him a car.

'Are you Makanya, the sangoma?'

Makanya nodded gravely. 'I am that person.'

'I have a problem. I'm told you are the best person to help me.' Makanya's eyebrows rose slightly. The man wiped his face with a white handkerchief. 'Can we go inside? Or must we stand here in the sun?'

'No. Please. Come into my Consulting Room.'

Makanya led the way into the house. The main room was lounge, dining room and consulting room combined. A tiny kitchenette in the back corner crowded the refrigerator into the lounge area, where it hummed and grumbled in the moist heat.

Makanya offered chilled water, which Ndumu accepted, and then they sat.

'Now, how can I help?'

'I think Jacob Mongae is cheating me. He's my bookkeeper. I sell a lot of cars – good cars at good prices – and yet make very little money. I'm sure he is taking some of the money, but then fixes the books so I can't tell. I don't know much about accounts.'

'You have come to the right man,' Makanya said firmly.

'Do you know anything about accounting?'

Makanya hesitated, but decided honesty was best. He shook his head. 'But the *spirits* know,' he said gravely.

The car salesman nodded, appearing impressed.

'Please give me the folders you brought.'

As soon as Makanya held the folders, he knew that something was wrong. He didn't even need to open them, but he did so to satisfy Ndumu. He looked through the rows of neat handwritten figures with occasional cancellations and corrections. From time to time he grunted, but the numbers meant nothing to him. Yet the feeling of wrongness became stronger as he scanned.

At last he closed the folders. 'You are right,' he told his visitor. 'There's a problem. We will consult the spirits.'

From a box on his table he withdrew a square of colorful cloth and an old leather bag. Squatting on the floor, he spread out the cloth, opened the bag, reached in, and withdrew a collection of dried bones and other arcane items. Closing his eyes, he tossed them into the middle of the cloth. Then he walked around considering the arrangement from different perspectives. But today the patterns meant nothing to him. He nodded firmly as if all was clear. Then he drank water to give himself time to think.

'The spirits believe you may be right, but it's not certain. This is how we will find out for sure and catch the man. I will give you a very special potion. You must

put this on some of the pages. It may stain a bit.' He shrugged. 'You must watch the bookkeeper closely as he handles those pages. If he is guilty, his fingers will stick when he touches them, like the money is sticking to his fingers. If he isn't...' He shrugged again.

Ndumu seemed very pleased with this idea. He accepted a small bottle of clear oily liquid, listened carefully to the instructions, and paid the R250 charge without complaint. He promised to return soon with the outcome. But Makanya rather doubted that he would.

The sangoma saw the man to his car and watched him drive off, leaving behind smoke and the smell of burned rubber.

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Makanya was wrong. Less than a week later, an Audi A4 bounced up the road and pulled up outside the house. Ndumu climbed out looking shaken.

'The suspension,' he said. 'It's just the shocks. Replace those, and it'll be good as new.' Then his mood changed, his face broke into a broad smile, and he took Makanya's hand firmly. 'It was exactly as you foretold, doctor,' he said warmly. Makanya's eyebrows rose at the honorific.

'The spirits know all,' he responded.

Soon they were seated in the consulting room drinking ice water. Ndumu was full of enthusiasm.

'Mongae's fingers stuck to each page! Like they were Velcro!'

Makanya nodded sagely as though this was exactly what he had expected. In fact, he was quite surprised the spell had worked so well.

'Did anyone else see it?' A little word of mouth advertising would do no harm.

But Ndumu shook his head. 'I asked him to stay late and go through the cash book with me. I wanted to observe him alone. It was amazing! He had to jerk his fingers from the paper and complained it had glue on it. I said that could not be and showed him how my fingers slid smoothly over the same page. Then he threw the

book away from him and jumped up. He said he must have grease on his hands from lunch, and ran away. He didn't come back until the next day, he was so scared.'

'What happened then?'

Ndumu frowned. 'I told him I knew he'd been stealing from me. That he'd been caught in a strong spell, like a bug in the yellow web of one of those big, hard spiders. I told him he must pay back the money, and then I'd forgive him. But he denied it all. Refused to even talk about it. I was very angry and shouted. But he just laughed and said I could do nothing.'

'Perhaps you should threaten him with the police.'

Ndumu made a snorting sound to indicate what he thought of that idea. 'Then I'll never see my money.'

For a few moments neither man said anything. At last Makanya asked, 'What do you want me to do?' Obviously Ndumu hadn't braved the bad road for nothing.

Ndumu hesitated. 'I think you should put a powerful curse on him. Something really bad. That gets worse and worse until he confesses and begs to pay me my money! Then you can take it off.'

Makanya was alarmed. He shook his head vigorously. 'This is a bad idea. Curses are dangerous. They're very hard to put on and even harder to take off. I don't deal in curses.' Ndumu seemed about to interrupt, so the sangoma added, 'And they are very expensive.' That seemed to deflate the salesman.

'What can we do then?'

Makanya considered consulting the spirits. But they had already exposed the culprit. It was really up to Ndumu to resolve the matter now. An idea came to him.

'I suggest you confront him again. Tell him that you have consulted a powerful sangoma – perhaps the most powerful in all of Zululand – the very same one who caught him in the spider web of the pages of the accounting books. And this sangoma wants to put a horrible curse on him, that will make his feet burn like walking in a fire. That they will itch and burn and hurt until he can't stand it anymore,

and every step will be pain.' Makanya hesitated, surprised at his own eloquence. 'You could threaten to take him to the police after that. It's always good to bring the police into a story. It makes a use for them.'

Ndumu nodded. 'This is a good plan. I'll tell him about the curse. And how his feet will swell and get blisters, and the skin will come off!'

Makanya smiled. Ndumu was getting into the spirit of things. But the salesman was already on his feet, heading for the Audi.

Makanya stopped him. 'It's two hundred and fifty rand,' he said firmly.

Ndumu turned back to him. 'But you have done nothing. Just a suggestion. Done nothing.'

Makanya drew himself to his full height of five foot eight, his head level with Ndumu's shoulder. 'I've told you how to solve your problem. The spirits...'

'Were not involved,' Ndumu interrupted, nodding at the untouched bones.

Makanya cursed under his breath. He should have consulted the spirits after all.

'What about a head doctor? He sits and listens to your problems and does nothing either. And charges you much more than two hundred and fifty rand.'

Ndumu shrugged. 'I don't consult head doctors. If your plan works, I'll be back. And I'll pay you double.'

Then he climbed into the Audi and started back down the road. There was a crunch as a wheel dropped into a pothole, and the chassis hit the ground. Makanya, angry, watched him go. But he wasn't too worried. No one would dare cheat a sangoma who could catch a thief's sticky fingers. He gave a satisfied grunt and returned to the shade.

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Indeed, a week later Ndumu was back. This time he was driving a white, bottom-of-the-line Toyota which, for once, seemed to be free of car trouble. However, when he levered himself out of the car, he looked frustrated and cross. Makanya's heart sank. It seemed his idea hadn't worked out.

Ndumu was very sour. He brushed aside the offer of cold water, flopped into a chair, and got straight to the point.

'I asked Mongae to stay late,' he told the sangoma. 'Then I did as you said. But it went wrong immediately. The man shouted that he'd never admit stealing the money. Said I could rot in hell. But then he cried out that his feet were hurting, and he started to scream. He ran off yelling.' Makanya nodded quickly several times, impressed, as always, with the spirits' ability to take a hint.

'And then?'

'And then he vanished. No one's seen him since. Not his wife, not his friends, not even his mistress. It's been four days now.' Ndumu brought his fist down on the table, and Makanya jumped. 'He's gone. Taken off with my money.' He glared at the sangoma. 'Or worse.'

'What do you mean?'

'People are saying you *did* curse him, that he's dead. They are very angry. Even the police are listening. They may come here.'

'Do they know about me?'

'Of course. I told them what happened.'

Makanya's heart sank. He hoped Mongae's family didn't live close by.

Ndumu got up to go.

'What about my money? The threat worked as I said.'

But Ndumu merely snorted and folded his large frame into the small car. Then he slammed the door and drove off, frowning.

Then, after a few moments, the frown evaporated and his face widened into a smile. And he started to laugh.

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Makanya watched until the dust had faded. He was thinking about the remarkable success of his magic. And how the only witness was the man who didn't bother to pay him. He walked into the house, scratching his head. He opened a carton of

sorghum beer, its sour taste refreshing and filling. Then he took the bones from his desk and threw them out on the cloth. This time the pattern seemed to make sense. He did it a second time, looking from another perspective. And a third. Then he nodded firmly.

He knew what he needed to do.

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By the end of the week, Ndumu was no longer smiling. Things seemed to be going wrong. He lost things, or they vanished. He was tense and found the weather oppressive, although no one else seemed bothered. He slept badly, with vague figures haunting his dreams. The night before, he'd woken to a loud crash followed by a horrible, eerie scream. He'd lain awake for half an hour before he dozed off again.

The day had been bad, too. He'd lost a couple of sales, which depressed him more than it should have. Perhaps it's just lack of sleep, he thought.

It was getting late, almost dark. No buyers would come now. He decided to head for home.

His latest car, an old Ford Cortina, was running on three cylinders and stalled as he drove into his driveway. At least it got me home, he thought, directing a kick at a wheel. One day I'll buy myself a decent car. From some other dealer! He started up the broad cement pathway to his house.

Suddenly there was a horrid yowl, and something black with green eyes flew into his face. He screamed and batted it away, feeling razor nails clawing at his cheeks. The thing bounced away, landed on its feet, and hissed at him. Then it was gone. His heart was racing. He wiped his face, covering his hand in his own blood. A cat, he thought. Just a cat. A pitch-black cat. With green eyes. He shuddered. Where had it come from? There was a narrow cast-concrete wall between him and the next property. Perhaps it had been lying on the wall, and he'd frightened it. But

why would it launch itself at his face? Frightened animals run away unless they're cornered. He went into the house and carefully locked and bolted the door.

That night he woke to a scratching sound, as though a large animal was trying to get into the house. The scratches got louder, then stopped. A few minutes passed, and then there was an awful scream. He jumped out of bed, turned on the light, and rushed to the front door. But then he hesitated. What was out there? At last, with a curse, he threw open the door. The outside light barely cut through the gloom of the moonless night. At first Ndumu saw nothing. Then he saw the gouges on the door's outer surface. Something with huge claws. His skin crawled. That was when he noticed the pathway. There were muddy boot prints making their way up to the front door and back. The mud looked slimy, like something a slug might leave. He followed the prints with his eyes. They came from the widest point of the path, up to the door and back. Then they vanished as if the thing had taken flight. Vanished!

He slammed the door and locked it again. For a while he leaned against the wall, shaking, promising himself that he'd investigate in the daylight. Then he went back to the bedroom and locked that door too, and lay awake waiting for dawn. But during the night it rained, and in the morning no sign of the prints remained.

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Makanya heard the car coming down the road. Even his untrained ear could hear the roughness of the engine. The Ford Cortina jerked to a stop outside his house, and Ndumu climbed out. Makanya noted how the salesman had changed. The confidence was gone. He looked frightened, and his handshake was weak, the palm too moist for the cool of the early hour.

'You'd better come inside, Mr Ndumu,' he said.

The man drank his water with an unsteady hand and told his story. Makanya listened intently. He asked for clarification of a few points and shook his head sympathetically when Ndumu told him about the cat. His face registered shock



when he heard the tale of the previous night. When Ndumu was finished, the sangoma said nothing for a full minute. Then he said, 'You killed him, didn't you?'

Ndumu sat silent, his jaw clenched.

'Mongae. You murdered him.'

'You knew? How did you know?' Ndumu's eyes oozed fear.

Makanya gave him a withering look. It was a question a child wouldn't ask.

'What is it? What can I do?'

'It is an angry ghost. A very dangerous ghost. It wants your life. Or worse.'

'You must stop it, get rid of it!'

'How did you kill him?'

'I strangled him that night when I said I told him about the curse. I lied about that. And about the stickiness too.'

'What did you do with his body?'

'Why do you want to know that?' There was a touch of the old arrogance.

'It matters.'

Ndumu shrugged and described a place in the hills outside the town.

Makanya jumped up. 'You buried him *there*. That's terrible! It's a place of power, the spirit...' He shuddered and looked around as if he expected to see the ghost behind him

'You have to help me!'

'Stay here. I have to go out to find something that will give you strong protection. It will keep the ghost away from you until we can set it to rest. Don't move. Even in the daylight, it may find you.'

Then he was gone, and Ndumu sat sweating in the small house, frightened. After what seemed an age, he heard the sangoma outside running water and stirring something. At last he returned carrying a jar of dark, viscous material, tightly sealed.

'Put this on your hands and face at night. Any part of you that is exposed. Don't go out. Stay in your house. Is that clear?' Ndumu nodded. 'Then this is what

you must do. Wait two nights. Go back to the grave. Confess to Mongae's spirit that you killed him by strangling him. Say you are deeply sorry for this act, that you were possessed by an evil spirit yourself. That you have come to make amends.'

'Possessed by an evil spirit, yes. But how do I make amends?'

'You must dig up the corpse and cover it with this blanket.' He indicated a colorful blanket spread on the floor. 'Then bury it again, and the spirit will be at rest. In the meantime, I will use all my powers to protect you.'

Ndumu nodded and reached for the jar, but Makanya pulled it back. 'I need to be paid.'

'Oh, yes.' Ndumu groped for his wallet. 'Five hundred rand.'

Makanya shook his head. 'Five thousand.'

Ndumu blanched, but didn't argue. He had to drive back to town to get the money. When he returned, Makanya had the blanket ready, folded, but damp. It now had a pungent, unpleasant smell. Ndumu grabbed the jar and made to open it, but Makanya stopped him. 'You are safe now. Wait until tonight.'

Ndumu just nodded, took the blanket and the jar, and left with muttered thanks.

Makanya counted the money and hid it. Later he would buy plenty of sorgum beer. Now he made a call to Sergeant Johannes van Zyl, a white Afrikaner policeman but, surprisingly, a friend and occasional client. He told Johannes where to look and when, and hung up, satisfied. It is always good to bring the police into the story; it makes a use for them.

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Three days later Johannes called him. 'It was exactly as you said, hey. We heard him apologizing to Mongae, and then he started to dig. That's when we arrested him. Hell, Makanya, how did you know he was the murderer and that he'd be there last night?'

'The spirits.'

Johannes gave a doubtful grunt. 'Well, it doesn't really matter. He's made a full confession. There wasn't much else he could do after what he'd said, and trying to dig up the grave, and all that, hey.'

'Why did he kill Mongae?' Makanya asked.

'He discovered that Ndumu was cheating on tax and was blackmailing him.'

So that was what he had sensed in the folders. Makanya nodded, but felt a late twinge of sympathy. Blackmail was bad, while cheating on taxes was quite acceptable.

'Ndumu was in a terrible state. What on earth was that stuff all over him?'

'Fresh dog shit,' said Makanya with satisfaction.

Johannes gave a guffaw, although it hadn't been pleasant driving Ndumu to the police station. 'I won't even ask about that blanket he had with him.'

Soon the conversation was over, and Makanya settled to finish his sorgum beer. It was early, but he was celebrating.

An impressive black cat with green eyes came into the room, seated itself well out of reach and gave him a haughty look.

Makanya greeted it. 'Have you forgiven me, Cat? Perhaps I have some milk.' He went to the fridge. Scratching around in it for something for Cat, he discovered the pot of sticky clay mixed with chicken fat. He'd forgotten to throw it out.

It reminded him that he needed to clean his boots.

\*\*This story first appeared in the Summer 2010 edition of *Strand Magazine*