

# The Incomers

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## Dedication

For Norah Elizabeth McPartlin.  
Thanks Mum.



...see me through the eyes of history  
propaganda of the past  
see me as you've been told  
see me as you've heard  
now, see for yourself  
see me as **you** see me  
see me as **I** see myself  
see me as I am

(extract of *see me* taken from *ancient voices  
speak urban poetry: son of moyo chirandu* -poems  
by tawona sithole )



## Chapter One

Ellie closes her eyes and squeezes the baby tight against her churning stomach. The plane is descending, a voice tells her this, but where is the ground? She sees only dirty clouds. The cabin shakes and rumbles like the ground at home when the mine blasts new rock. Her ears hurt and her head fills with mud. They are going to crash; this she knows for sure and she clutches the beaded *juju* round her neck and prays to her God for forgiveness. Her poor baby, to die so young. The stewardess asks the gentleman in the seat next to Ellie to extinguish his cigarette and fasten his seat belt.

The sudden sunlight hitting the small portal makes Ellie blink. She picks out the shadow of the plane in the dark grey water on the earth below. The plane dips to the right until the wing tip almost skims the surface of the waves and Ellie sees the reflection of the fuselage rush up to meet her. Why does stewardess walk up and down, calm? They are going to crash into the water. A voice speaks all around again and instructs everyone to look out of the right hand windows. The passengers turn their eyes towards Ellie and stare now, where they avoided her gaze before.

‘The Forth Bridges,’ the voice announces. ‘The famous red railway bridge is over sixty years old but look at the lovely new road bridge, opened only two years ago by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.’

Ellie can tell this is a great excitement and hugs Nat and smiles. They are not going to crash.

When Ellie steps out of the airplane door she gasps as

her breath leaps back to hide in her mouth. As she touches her feet onto the hard concrete the hairs on her arms jump out of their pores, she feels a tingle creep then shake her body; her teeth rattle in her mouth. Her toes go numb and her legs cannot move. The baby begins to cry and she forces her legs awake to trot to the airport building.

There is no problem with her passport; this was dealt with in London.

James grabs her and Nat and hugs them tight as soon as she walks into the arrivals hall. Her husband has lost weight, Ellie thinks as she pats his back to confirm she is now here with him. As their lips close around their world she tastes again the cool mint of her husband and remembers that first time she tasted his toothpaste, in the hot cab of the white Landrover he drove in her homeland. He had leaned towards her and jabbed his ribs with the gear stick and she had giggled; he only smiled confidently, took her face in his cool hands and pulled her towards him. Ellie had been scared one of the nuns would see them but if they did, they never mentioned it.

James loads her two bags onto a trolley and takes the baby into his arms. Ellie marvels again how such a white man can beget such a black baby.

The dirty clouds have parted revealing a piercing blue sky to welcome Ellie to Scotland, and yet she hesitates to go back outside. James hands her back the child, shrugs his jacket off and throws it over her shoulders.

‘Oh Ellie, I’m sorry, I brought a coat and blanket for you but they’re in the car; it’s not far, if we hurry it will warm you up.’

He tries to grab her hand but Ellie pushes him away.

‘S ok, ’s fine.’ She takes a deep breath and pulls the baby’s shawl tighter around his body. He begins to cry again as if he too knows what is coming. Ellie grabs the bottom of her skirts and stamps her feet before allowing herself to be ushered toward a green Landrover.

The baby stops crying as soon as Ellie wraps them both in the blanket and gives him her breast. Her feet now throb as they begin to warm under the hot blast from the heater. She is surprised to see the shiny new bridge so soon after leaving the airport.

‘The Forth Bridges,’ she says.

‘Yes, how did you know?’

‘A voice on the plane told me.’

James laughs. ‘A voice? That was the captain.’

‘I know it is the captain. Do you think I am some ignoramus?’

He points to the other side of the bridge. ‘The Kingdom of Fife.’

‘So I come from one Kingdom to another. Where are the King and Queen of this Kingdom?’

‘Gone, hundreds of years ago.’

‘Then we shall be the new King and Queen of Fife,’ she holds up the now sleeping baby, ‘and Nat can be Prince.’

James pushes his hand under her blanket and grabs a chunk of her thigh.

‘I can’t wait to get you back to our palace.’

Ellie bows her head and smiles, but her voice remains closed.

Their silence stretches. James coughs.

‘How was your flight? You must be tired. You must be hungry.’

He stretches round to reach the back seat. The vehicle swerves and Ellie gasps as she sees a bush come towards her. James pulls the steering wheel round and drops a packet on her lap, all in one move.

‘I asked Cook to make you a sandwich; I thought you might be hungry.’

Ellie finds enough breath from her fright to say, ‘Thank you, ’s ok, I am fine.’ Her mother had packed some food for her journey and she could not eat even that. She knows she will eat when she is ready.

Everything is green and grey where folds of fields ripple towards hilly horizons. The road is smooth, a black scissor-cut slicing through the green. At one point on this road the Landrover stops and lets another car from the right pass, but it is not a crossroads. There is a concrete circle topped with a mound of earth in the middle of the road, but the road goes round the mound. James laughs.

‘You want to see your face – it’s called a roundabout.’

‘A round-a-bout.’ Ellie says to herself and wonders if she will ever be able to learn to drive on these roads with such obstructions. And so many different cars to avoid.

About a mile later James pulls the Landrover hard over into a single track road guarded by a brick house with a roof like the hat of a witch.

‘That’s one of the Lodges, the beginning of the estate grounds.’ James smiles towards her. ‘We’ll soon be home.’

Even though it is cold, James drives with his sleeves rolled up and Ellie finds her fingers twitch with the urge to stroke the golden hair on his arms, but she stops herself. It has been three months since she last saw him and she

finds she is shy. She hugs her son instead. He feels warm against her stomach and Ellie realises she is still cold despite wearing the thick wool coat James brought her.

‘I need to pop into the big hoose before I take you to your new home. The Fairbairns aren’t at home this season and the cook needs more money for provisions.’

Ellie wonders if this big hoose is bigger than the Fairbairns’ house in her country.

‘This must be an extensive farm.’ The baby stirs with her voice.

At home her own family has some land to farm, but it is out in the open where everyone can see how far it stretches to the horizon and they can see the herd of goats and the crops failing when the rains do not come.

‘Here,’ James says, ‘all the fields around are owned by the estate but farmed by tenants who pay their dues to the big hoose. The estate grounds are for hosting parties and shooting birds and deer, for fun as well as to eat. When the shooting season is over, the family will move to their other concerns in other countries.’

‘My country.’

Ellie realised when she met James that these people make their living off others’ labour and by agreeing to marry their Factor, Ellie had signed into that deal. She will have to learn to live with that.

The black road bumps over a ramp to a crunchy grey gravel track. A tall symmetrical line of shiny green bushes shelters a square house standing proud of its three storeys; its door is framed by pillars. Many, many windows, even windows on the roof, reflect the late afternoon sun. To the side of the main house, a squat block which looks like an afterthought, gives the house the shape of a lopsided

L. Ellie wonders how many people it takes to clean such a house and where do these people go when the family moves to shoot larger wild beasts than deer. James stops the Landrover at the bottom of a sweeping staircase of stone steps.

‘You stay here, I won’t be a minute.’

Windows at the base of the house blank Ellie. The engine noise dies now that the ignition has been turned off and leaves a silence that fills with bird song. A brown bird flutters to the ground and hops and jabs, hops and jabs at the lawn until it is rewarded with a plump worm. Ellie has never seen such a drab fellow before.

Nat wakes and wrestles with the blanket, wriggling to be laid down on the floor.

‘Shsh, shsh.’ Ellie pushes the blanket back and offers her swollen breast again and he grabs at her with his chubby fist and greedy mouth. Her tummy tugs as he latches on and she lays her head back to wait for the scrape of tiny teeth. Nat, still in his first year, is too old for breast feeding; James advised her in his last letter. She knows her husband is jealous; he wants her breast for himself. Even though she wishes to please James, it is too soon to wean her baby. What did men know of children?

James bounds down the steps two at a time, clearing the last three in one jump to land square at the vehicle door.

‘Right, let’s get you two home.’ He climbs into the seat and stares at her.

‘What are you doing? Someone might see.’ He pulls the blanket up over the baby’s head to cover her breast.

Ellie can feel her scalp itch with anger. ‘What is this, are you ashamed of your wife and baby?’

James rakes his hand through his thick curls. ‘No, it’s not that, it’s just that women around here don’t feed their babies outside.’

Ellie tugs the blanket off the baby. She can feel her face hot while her feet still throb with cold. ‘Well, I am not from around here, Mr Mason, and I will feed my baby where and when I want.’

She tucks the blanket around the baby’s rump and strokes his head then rests her own on the back of the seat and closes her eyes. Now she thinks she wants to hurry to her new home and close the door on what others might think.

The house James takes her to is a short drive down a lane to another witch’s hat, with tiny windows staring out to an overgrown garden. Dense forest crowds the sides of the house. When Ellie steps down onto the gravel the breath is whipped from her lungs by what she now knows is the sharp cold air of Scottish winter.

James leads her past a green door hidden by tangled rose bushes and ushers her around the corner towards the forest. They squeeze through a rusty wrought iron gate that James fastens behind him.

‘Do the Fairbairns cut down the trees here for their mine as they do in my country?’

James laughs. ‘No, these trees are part of the estate. This forest is tiny compared to the forests in your country. There is no money to be made from these trees.’ He points to a stone wall with a back gate that leads to a track. Beyond this Ellie can see another forest.

‘That is the biggest forest around here,’ James says. ‘No more than a wood really. It belongs to the Scottish

Co-operative Society, and they will keep it safe from loggers.’

The back garden is perfect for her. A small patch of tangled bush could be pulled and the ground cultivated. A rickety shed needs fixing but it has a good roof. She frowns at the trees shading the northern end of the garden then remembers where she is. This is good, she thinks.

James leans into her. ‘Don’t worry; we’ll soon have those weeds cleared.’

Weeds? Where she is from there are few weeds, only food growing in the wrong place.

James leads her through the back door into a kitchen and Ellie closes it behind her. She feels safe in here, even though the house is colder than outside. James dashes round flicking light switches and fiddling with a green stove in the corner.

‘The house has been lying empty for a while but the cook said someone had been up to air the place.’ He kicks the green stove and rattles its front door open. ‘They’ve put this on but it’s died down. It just needs a kick up the backside.’ He moves to Ellie and Nat and crushes them in a cuddle. ‘Once the stove is roaring we should never let it die.’

## The Pairty Line

‘Did ye hear who’s moved intae the estate?’

‘Aye, a big bloody black wumman.’

‘Huv ye seen ‘er then?’

‘Naw, ah jist heard, eh.’

‘Jist what ye’d expect fae they toffs, like. They spend a’ thir time in the jungle then bring thir coons, back here tae oor village.’

‘Is she workin’ fur the toffs then?’

‘Naw, she’s mairrit tae the factor, eh.’

‘Really, that braw bit boy wi’ the blond hair? Ah wis hoping Oor Denise wid get a look in wi’ him.’

‘Your Denise disnae stand a chance, they toffs aye stick thegither. Onywey, they say the blackie hus a bairn tae him.’

‘Really? So whit colour’s the bairn, like?’

‘Black as coal.’

‘Goad, who’d huv thocht.’

**Click** - ‘Did ye hear that?’

‘Aye, is it them again?’

‘Git aff this pairty line, ye nose y bastard.’

**Click.** ‘That telt them.’

## Chapter Two

‘Ellie, stop fluttering with that stove and come over here.’ James grabs two fistfuls of her backside and whirls her before smacking his mouth over hers. Even after two weeks she still cannot believe how warm his lips are in this cold house. His hands rummage over her body before he stuffs them up her jumper.

‘Yow!’ She twists free of him; his hands are not so warm.

‘Here, I have a present for you.’ He picks out a glossy book from his briefcase and by the way her strong man is holding it she knows it is heavy.

‘Mrs Watson, the cook, gave it to me. It’s for you. She thought you might like to learn about some of our plants.’ He thumps the book on the table. ‘I told her you were a country girl just like her.’

Ellie reaches over and touches the glossy cover of the book. ‘Which country are we talking about here?’

The first week after her arrival, Ellie scoured and cleaned the house and always had a kettle boiling to welcome a guest, and although she had no kola nut to make the welcome complete she had the packet of biscuits, half covered with chocolate, which James assured her would be adequate. But now two weeks have passed and she has yet to meet anyone from the big house or the village. They know she is here and yet no one comes. James says they are just giving her time to settle in. In her home the women of the village would bring gifts to a new bride to ease the lonely sickness of leaving her fatherland. This is

not so here. What is this place she follows her husband to?

Ellie drags the book towards her and reads the title: "*The Encyclopaedia of British Plants – Edible and Poisonous*". She does not understand. Does this Mrs Watson believe Ellie to be some kind of witch doctor to be appeased with delivered gifts or to be trained in local folklore?

‘Why could she not bring this gift to me herself?’

‘She is a busy woman. Come on, Ellie, it won’t hurt you to have a look inside and maybe try and be a little bit pleased. You know Mrs Watson has been out to the Suwokono estate loads of times, she is very knowledgeable about your country’s cooking. She just wants to help you fit in here.’ James stands back and looks at her with that funny stern mask he wears sometimes when he reads letters from his mother.

‘Why do you have to be so suspicious all the time? Have you never heard of hospitality?’

‘Gifts like this normally come at a price.’

Suspicious? Ellie is suspicious of the lack of direct hospitality here, but chooses to press her tongue on the top of her mouth to trap these words. She traces her finger over the glossy cover which is torn on one corner. If she licks her finger and rubs the torn section it heals for a moment but reopens when the pressure is released. She will tape that later, she thinks. She has never owned such a book. The books in the mission were used many, many times over; ripped and torn and damaged by the variations of the climate. She opens the cover and sees that someone has written on the first page ‘Wilhelmina Flemming. Christmas 1965.’

‘This book is only months old, why would she give it to me? It is too good to give to me.’

‘I’m not sure, I think Wilhelmina might be the sister who died last month. Maybe Cook’s having a clear out.’ He scrapes the chair back and stands over her.

Ellie peels back some pages and lets them flutter through her fingers, breathing in the intoxicating smell of the new print; the pages stop and remain open at *Elderflower*.

‘Fragrant white cluster flowers, grows in plenty in hedgerows. Flowers can be used for herbal tea, cordials, wine and champagne,’ she reads aloud.

‘You could make me some wine to drink in the evenings. I bet it would taste better than that disgusting palm stuff you used to inflict on me.’

‘I think you did not protest too much about my brother’s palm wine at the time,’ she says, ready to remind him of the time he disgraced himself and had to be put to bed in her family’s compound. But a look at his beaming face jams her tongue behind her teeth. He seems so innocent that she wonders how many children she looks after in this house. As he reddens with his bubbling enthusiasm, he dips his head and the golden mop of hair falls to hide his face. Ellie feels a pang that she might not live up to his expectations of her. When she smiles and pats his hand she sees him visibly relax.

‘Sure, I will make your wine. I will make you the best champagne in this Kingdom and we will sit in the garden and sip, and eat wild strawberries and we will watch the villagers struggle to the pub, past these stinky fish and chip shops you have told me about.’ She rubs her thumb over the torn cover.

‘You might regret giving me this book.’

James pushes in his chair. ‘I have to go,’ he kisses her on the forehead.

Before he leaves the room he pauses by the open door of the small bedroom and peers in at Nat, snoozing his afternoon away. Ellie smiles as she watches this young man she calls her husband back out of the room and ease the door closed without a sound.

Ellie circuits the house with a duster, trying to keep busy, but every other minute she returns to the table and stares at the book. She puts the kettle on the boiling ring and rattles the caddy to see how long the tea will last before she is forced to go to the village shop. She opens the lid and sniffs the powdered rubbish that is not real tea to her. She misses her tea: she misses the bitter bite on her tongue and the burnt aftertaste left when the cup has drained back to the cracked clay. This dust she has here has the flavour of mud.

She flicks the pages of the book, just to look at the pictures while she waits for the kettle to whistle, then sits to read a new page. When the growing season arrives she can make her own tea. There are many possibilities out there in the garden and the surrounding forest she has yet to explore. The afternoon gloom creeps across the floor to where she sits, forcing her to turn on the tall twisted wooden lamp that waits in the corner like a palm, giving instant light, illuminating what is now her life.

In Ellie’s home village — in a remote district a few miles from the great river — light comes from daylight or oil lamps. The first day her father took her to the mission school in the big town was the first time Ellie saw electric

lights. She remembers her tears and being mystified by many things in the town, but that small white switch which held the power to light up a whole room for intermittent periods of time was the most mystifying of all.

## The Pairty Line

‘Ye’ll never guess, eh? Effie MacCulloch hus seen the coon.’

‘Where?’

‘Doon at the burn collecting water.’

‘Git away wi ye. Whit wid she be daein’ that fur? Huv they no got running water up at the estate?’

‘Aye, but they say she cannae drink oor water, it makes her sick so she hus tae collect it fae the burn.’

‘Niver? Whit dis she look like?’

‘Mawkit, she walks aboot in bare feet and her hair is hingin’ wi’ grease.’

‘Lazy bitch.’

‘That’s no aw. She cannae clean her hoose eyther, that’s fur sure.’

‘How dae ye mean like?’

‘They say it’s a pig sty. Auld Mrs McGeever hud that hoose afore and it wis spotless. Noo apparently there’s rats running aboot and gress growing oot the chimney pot.’

‘Dirty bitch.’

‘Aye well, if ah git rats in ma hoose ah’ll be goan up there tae tell her.’

‘Good fur you.’