



The Dog's Dead

Oliver T. Spedding

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By 1998, four years after South Africa finally achieved democracy, hundreds of thousands of destitute South Africans still lived in squalid squatter camps spread across the country. San Diego squatter camp or informal settlement is situated on the western boundary of Johannesburg. Themba "Legs" Gwala, the under-nine sprint champion at his school, lives in the San Diego squatter camp near Johannesburg with his dad and mom and five-year-old sister, Gugu. His best friend, eight-year-old James "Chomp" Bafokeng, ravenous food consumer, and his parents, also live in the settlement and the two boys witness the poverty and hardships that the residents have to endure: no electricity, no proper sewerage system and no running water, winter snow, summer torrential downfalls and the danger of runaway shack fires. They also witness violent protest actions demanding basic services, a barbaric vigilante justice system and unresolved crime. But they also experience the excitement of going to a major football game in Soweto, playing in the snow, almost drowning in a storm water drain during a flash flood and hearing about African myths and legends. They struggle to understand segregation, the stokvel system (traditional savings scheme), learn about illegal mining in the abandoned gold mines, the dangers of glue sniffing, the fire-fighting service that inspires Chomp to be a fireman when he's big and arithmetic that inspires Legs to be an accountant. Other characters in the settlement include Misses Ntombi Zondo, the settlement's Sangoma, who is dedicated to preserving the myths and legends of Africa and enthralled Legs, Chomp and Gugu with her wonderful stories, Mister Bongani Cele, the retired illegal gold miner who has spent most of his life searching for the non-existent treasure in abandoned gold mines, Misses Lerato Nonyana, the retired school teacher with her stories about African urban legends, Mister Calvin Tembe, the Mozambican "mayor" of San Diego, striving to help the illiterate residents, Mister Joseph Amin, the Ugandan law student who helps Mister Tembe with the resident's legal matters and Constable Edward Luthuli, the settlement's lazy incompetent policeman. Legs and Chomp also witness the tragic death of Misses Dikeledi Bapo by "necklacing" after she is found guilty of theft by the vigilante justice system, Legs' dad risk his life to save a stranger's child after a taxi accident, a violent service delivery protest, a shameful xenophobic incident and a shack fire that destroys a large part of the settlement. But when Legs' friend Jabu Buthelezi is murdered in the nearby forest by a serial killer, Legs blames himself for issuing a challenge to Jabu to go into the forest and collect manna. His self-guilt is aggravated when he neglects to visit a young resident, Isaac Jali, who dies a lonely death from cancer. Then Legs' dog, Snooper, is killed and he turns to glue sniffing to escape his torment, something he learnt when he and Chomp ran away from home and joined a gang of street children. But the serial killer lurks in the forest that irresistibly attracts "Legs" Gwala.

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