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I

IN NIGERIA they have a saying: “He who ventures into the land of the dead must be ready to dance with night spirits.” It’s a phrase that seems custom-made for Hillbrow’s overcast drug underworld.

And any valiant heart that has dared to linger along this Joburg inner-city slum’s tapered thoroughfares after 10 pm, especially over weekends, would agree that this dance could have intricate — and often fatal — choreographies.

As I cruise along Louis Botha Avenue into Empire Road, I wonder what the many people do who hang out next to the closed-down Mimosa Hotel and the nearby petrol station.

Adorned in sterling bling-bling that could bring eyesight to the blind, I can’t help noticing them. They’re mostly garbed in imported fancy blue jeans, tight-fitting silk shirts to display their muscles and scare off smash-and-grab thugs, and heavy Caterpillar boots or sparkling white Puma, Adidas or Nike takkies.

To round it off, they’re usually leaning against something, feet and hands crossed, eyes scanning their environment as they speak in loud voices.

Along Jagger Street, a rifle shot away from the Mimosa Hotel, are more buildings haunted by those night spirits. Down Banket Street, close to Louis Botha, is the Safari Hotel. Night spirits reign supreme outside its curio doors. I continue down Twist, across Van der Merwe, passing an endless succession of closed-down residential hotels and high-rise apartment buildings. We all know who the area boys are around here.

Down Pretoria Street, then east into Abel, past Tudhope to the intersection with Lily; around the corner into Soper. The pattern continues: hotels and apartment buildings that are “closed” yet occupied, like many other buildings in the area, mostly by Nigerians.

The truth is, drug peddlers have mapped out Hillbrow. It’s theirs and they won’t be leaving it anytime soon. Many of the buildings are owned by Nigerian drug barons and they

let them out only to pushers, pimps and prostitutes. Shutting down the buildings won't solve anything. Ask the city council and they'll agree. The drug peddlers mutate.

I had met a Nigerian after Mass at the Catholic Cathedral of Christ the King, in Doornfontein, and asked if he could connect me with a drug peddler I could spend a night with to see how business is done.

The Nigerian goes as James, although his real name is Iyke. He owns a TV repair shop from which he earns his keep — legit, or so he says. After arriving in South Africa in 1995 he peddled drugs at the notorious Statesman Hotel on Joel Street, made a killing — and decided to go straight.

Many of his compatriots hankered after straight lives too but, alas, they weren't smart enough to dance with spirits. Their remains now lie in some cemetery, never to see home again. Others are stuck deep inside Diepkloof prison.

James's contact is Emmanuel, who sells rice and stew next to the Mimosa Hotel. Everyone's scared of being set up, so we slate a rendezvous at Emmanuel's place. James tells me we're down for Wednesday 7 pm.

Wednesday night. Emmanuel — real name Chibike — lives in a flat in the Park Lane Hotel. He used his South African girlfriend's ID to get the place after the hotel's management purged the Nigerians a few years ago, blaming them for the building's poor hygiene. The management also claimed that the cops had repeatedly broken down the door to look for drug dealers — all at the expense of the hotel.

Inside his bachelor flat on the seventh floor, Chibike kills the lights and lights a candle. He opens the drawer of a small table and pulls out a sleek 9 mm pistol. My heart starts dancing on my tongue. I am alone; Iyke left shortly after introducing me to Chibike.

"Do you want to bicom a huzzuler, my men?" he asks, his fiery red eyes piercing mine as he tries to decipher my motives.

"Only for one night," I stammer, scanning the room for the nearest exit. He flings the gun at me. "Have you fired one before — I mean at somebody?"

Before I can respond he gestures for me to hand it back. Then he begins demonstrating. On the street, never hold the gun with two hands — only gays or women do that. Never hold the gun with one hand, the other supporting it underneath — it shows you had some military training.

Because the street is so vast and unpredictable, and you might find yourself surrounded, you should hold the gun with one hand, spraying bullets at the person who set you up, while using the other hand to ward off other advancing attackers, all the while using your head to look for a way to get out of the mess.

Chibike then walks up to me and feels my arms. About 2 kg of raw muscles each. My chest, about 6 kg. My height: 1.83 m. "My men, Iyke told me you used to play soccer. Huzzuling is like soccer. You have to out-muscle the other guys if a jonkie pulls over," he says, adding that with good physique you can gain area control.

After cross-examining me to make sure I'm not trying to set him up, Chibike finally agrees to take me to the street on a Friday — month-end. We've spoken in Pidgin, English and

some Ibo. As I dash out of the room, he warns me once more about what happens to people who set other people up.

I spend several hours in the gym on Thursday. Friday morning I read Chinua Achebe's *Eze Goes to School* to prepare myself mentally and to polish my knowledge of Nigerian society.

The door swings open on a chilly Friday night. Chibike is busy cutting chunks of rock cocaine into smaller pieces (atuke in street Ibo and orgu in real Ibo). Each costs R50. The loading begins.

Chibike lies down on his stomach on the bed. His girlfriend lines little white rocks tied in blue plastic bags along his spine. Then she plasters them down and applies iodine to the plaster.

It's a trick to fool the cops. They usually do not search people's backs, so that's where peddlers hide "kommodity". If they do happen to search a back, the cops get the smell of iodine. The peddler tells them that he's just out of hospital after a back operation. To get your hands on a rock, simply pretend to scratch your back and peel off a batch.

Next are Chibike's shoes. The soles come off and rocks are hidden inside the cavity. He slips the 9 mm inside his socks and hands me a revolver.

"I hear you're Catholic and sings Latin kantor during the 11 o' klok Mass. I love hearing Latin at Mass. Say some prayers in Latin — it might be our last," he says as he tucks in an expensive blue-black shirt and reaches for a black leather jacket.

I pant and then stammer: "Deus in adiutorium meum intende. Domine ad adjuvandum me festina. Amen." ("Oh God come to my assistance. Oh Lord make haste to help me. Amen.") We all shout "amen" and make the sign of the cross.

"Let's make monie, my men."

We flag down a cab in front of the Hillbrow Inn. Chibike says peddlers at the Inn cater for the prostitutes and pimps there as well as for clients from the Summit Club. He points to two guys leaning against a wall outside the Inn. "They're South Africans. They huzzule ganja [dagga]."

As the cab waits for traffic to clear along Claim, Chibike points to a group of kids under a tree next to the Twilight Children street shelter at the corner of Van der Merwe. He says they're selling mandrax.

A fact of the Hillbrow scene is that the various drug dealers all stick to one type of drug. Cocaine is left to the Nigerians. Mandrax and ganja are sold by South Africans. Don't try asking the wrong dealer for the wrong drugs — especially at night.

Cocaine peddlers will tell you there are two types of junkies: clean and dirty. Corporate types are clean junkies. The peddlers say they're usually white or Indian. Prostitutes, pimps, strippers and members of Hillbrow's new black and coloured gay community are called dirty junkies.

How do they get their names? It's simple: clean junkies don't waste time asking for discounts or for peddlers to sell them half of a R50 rock. They don't attempt to swop takkies or black-and-white TV sets or sex for drugs. They don't even enter Hillbrow without first making a few phone calls. In short, like the Nigerian drug peddlers would say, "Clean jonkies pai flat."

In Hillbrow there are very few new junkies. If you were to encounter a new one, he would most likely be accompanied by an old bird who knows the terrain and already has a supplier.

It's a big gamble to buy or sell drugs, even for seasoned dealers and their clients. Nobody rushes to meet a car. You wait for a car to slow down and the driver to lower his window and signal "5" or "10" with his fingers to indicate how much cocaine he wants to buy. "Five" is a R50 rock and "10" is two R50 rocks. Not knowing this code has cost lives.

Clean junkies are drug peddlers' best payers — and their worst nightmares. It's very easy for clean junkies to set the dealers up or to orchestrate a big bust. However, it is fascinating to see how clean junkies are approached by the dealers.

To circumvent a potential set-up, a peddler puts a R50-rock in his mouth, his index finger on the trigger of the 9mm in his jacket and his right hand on the roof of the car as he talks to the buyer. When the junkie passes R50 the hustler spits the drugs into the car.

The risks are always there. A peddler might trick a junkie by selling him soap wrapped in plastic. Or a junkie might give the dealer counterfeit money and speed off with the drugs. Quite rarely do they pull tricks on each other at the same time. If it does happen, the dealers say: "When a crook crooks another crook, the devil smiles."

Cops often grab peddlers by the throat to prevent them from swallowing the drugs — but then the dealer could pull a gun. Peddlers used to put their hands and head into a car to collect money and chat to a client, but this has often proved fatal.

Outside the petrol station on Louis Botha, Chibike introduces me to a group of hustlers. Some are wearing balaclavas to ward off the cold. They all call me "nigga".

As Chibike rushes to a client in a black Mercedes-Benz, a hustler called Chinedu approaches me. "If you're new in dis biznezz I tink you must start tolkin with di dirty jonkie. Some of di dirty jonkies will one day bring you a clean jonkie and if you treat dem nice, money will start rollin in within a munth's time."

Chinedu says he's from Abba in eastern Nigeria. He tells me that the thought of spending the rest of his life behind bars is the one thing that scares drug peddlers like himself to death.

"Nigga, I tell you, do whatever is possible not to go to jail in this kountry. Our people are ripared to pay thousands of bush [dollars] to avoid jail. If you go to jail, pay it to the cops. After all, you can make 10 000 bush in less than a munth's time."

I also find out from Chinedu that drug peddlers are damned superstitious. For example, they believe that if you kill someone, you must not allow the victim's blood to touch any part of your body, as the killer will inherit all the victim's sins.

Soon Chibike comes back, takes me behind a lamppost and gives me R300 to hide inside a special black cap he's given me. He says Hillbrow police have become clever. "They know we always hide money in our socks or inside our shoes. To survive in Hillbrow you have to be a step ahead of di police all di time."

Then he reaches for his shoes, rips open the right sole and empties its content into his big palm. He hands me a razor blade and asks me to split the rocks in half.

“It’s after midnight,” he says. “Dirty junkies are soon coming. Strip shows in di hotels around here start at 1 am. You have to start huzzuling them dirty junkies. Oya, let me show you how tu do it.”

He asks me “not to listen to stories from dirty jonkies and to be aware of the cops” — whom I’ve now learnt are called snakes (eke or aguo in street Ibo).

Selling to dirty junkies requires a different method. After slicing each R50-rock into two R25-pieces, we hide the drugs under pebbles on a nearby pavement.

When a dirty junkie approaches, you chat amicably, collect R25 — some junkies swear they have only R20, only to pop out another R20 after they finished “drawing” the first rock — and point to a particular pebble. The junkie lifts the pebble and heads off with the merchandise. This way hustlers can’t be set up.

My first client is Amanda, a Summit Club stripper. Her tousled face tells the story of someone who’s been in and out of rehab before finally succumbing to the lethal sting of crack cocaine. She’s nearing 40 and Chinedu tells me she used to work at Hillbrow police station.

“Where’s Tony? I’m talking to no one but Tony,” squeaks the dirty brunette. Chinedu begins to bark, pointing at me, “Here’s Tony’s brodda. You can buy from him. Don’t we have di same stuff like Tony?”

Cocaine peddlers are known to their clients as Mike or Tony. Chinedu says it often happens that a junkie who’s new to the scene would walk into a crowd and ask for Tony — not knowing that he’s staring at a whole bunch of Tonys.

“Tony treats me nice. He supplies me with a pipe free of charge. Are you Tony’s brother?” she asks, drunk and irritable. She hands over R15. “This is all I have, but I promise you I’ll be back with the rest. I’ll bring my friends.”

I decide to gamble without telling Chibike. Amanda staggers off into the dark. By 3 am she’s back. For once a junkie told the truth. She has three girls with her.

“This is...”

“Nigga, Tony’s brodda,” I finish her sentence. One of the ladies pops out R100, saying she doesn’t want to have to come again because it’s too cold. The other gives me R20 and Amanda waves R50.

They’re back half an hour later.

By 5 am I’ve lost track of the amount of cash I have on me. It’s beginning to drag me down.

Chinedu and some other hustlers approach me. They’ve heard that I speak a few languages. They’ve been looking for an agent to be stationed in Brazil (Obodo Pele in street Ibo).

Chinedu says because he and the others can speak only Ibo and a bit of English, they have difficulty controlling business from Portuguese-speaking Brazil. As a result the flow of drugs into South Africa has been punctuated by mishaps — dealers have been set up in South America and cartel representatives have run off with huge sums of money.

“If we had our own guy there we’d be able to start our own group and kut out di middleman who always let us down,” says one of the hustlers. And they’re willing to pay.

They’re always on the lookout for “pipole who’re serious about bizinezz” — legal representatives, dealers, agents to be stationed in Latin America, drug distributors, trustworthy bankers, club owners who’ll let them sell to patrons. But before I can be lured by their promises of big money, Chibike arrives. “It’s six o’ klok. Let’s go. Another group is coming now.”

Back at the Park Lane we count our takings. I’ve made over R1 000 while Chibike has made about R4 500. His girlfriend, meanwhile, has prepared huge pots of rice and stew for Chibike to sell on the pavement. A plate costs R5. This operation makes them over R2 000 a day.

Two plates are served. We wash them down with soft drinks. Chibike will get two hours’ sleep; he has to be ready to sell rice and stew by 8 am. He knocks off at 3 pm, goes to the supermarket to buy stock for the next day — and then he heads for “the blackies to change rands to bush”.

The drug peddlers name each currency they trade in after that country’s leader. “Bush” is their parlance for dollars; British pounds are called “Thatchers”. Countries are named after great personalities, which is why Brazil is called “Pele”.

These names are used both to fool the cops and to determine who’s coming to set you up.

“Blackies” — black-market dealers — are Senegalese who change rands into other currencies. Chibike wants me to come along.

The world of the blackies is intricate and murky, perhaps even more so than that of the drug peddlers. That’s why their story has not yet been written. The dance of the spirits never ends.

II

Have you ever felt the sub-zero chill of a gun barrel on your skull — execution style? When you have a gun to your head, thinking seems impossible. No coherent answers come in response to the queries your assailants pose. Your brain's vaporised — like 10 minutes ago.

Then the unmistakable happens. You develop a splitting headache. I call it the omega headache. The kind that crowns all the headaches you've ever had on earth, as if to say: your earthly headaches are over.

I've had a gun to my head twice. Kingston, a few years ago outside some ghetto club. Two knock-around Jamaicans thought they'd found the tooth fairy in me. They wanted a Rolex watch, credit card, coins and anything sellable. We wrestled in the dark. The Uzi spewed no bullets. It wasn't loaded. Jerks.

Fast forward. Kempton Park. The gun's loaded. It's South Africa. Don't fumble. They are Russian black market dealers. Three of them with drawn guns stand around me like a pack of starving wolves over a bull calf. I'm helpless, half naked on a soft pink duvet — the one on which moments before, a Russian blonde was massaging me. Soon it may be covered with blood. I know the end is near. I can smell it. I'm certain my name's already inscribed on a tombstone. With guns gaping at me inside a love nest filled with the sweet fragrance of air freshener and the blonde's Chanel, my emotions become horrid premonitions as I try to recollect the odyssey that has brought me here.

It's true: At the point of death, your past hustles and bustles at you at the speed of light.

Like many scribes, I refuse to be inoculated with a vaccine the ancient Greek scholars called Elected Blindness, or what crawlers of the underworld call "mind your own business".

If I hadn't taken an interest in the restless people around Hillbrow's defunct Mimosa Hotel and the nearby petrol station, I wouldn't have met the Nigerian drug peddler Chibike. After meeting him, I could have resisted the temptation of accompanying him to change his rands into dollars on the black market. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe writes: "What kills a man begins like an appetite."

Inside a room at the Park Lane Hotel, I watch Chibike count the money we'll be trading. R70 000. He's hoping to get \$11 000 from his pile of rands. It will be the second time in four months he'll be changing rands to dollars. He says he intends going home this Christmas with no less than \$35 000. He changes money when he has a rand equivalent of \$10 000.

I urge him to check the news for the exchange rates so that he can bargain better. He refuses. On the black market it's R6>\$1 and it will remain so until the rand appreciates. Then the Senegalese will adjust their prices to about R5.50 to the dollar. After some persuasion he agrees to watch the news. The rand's trading at R6.42 to the dollar. No luck.

We pack the R70 000 in several pairs of black socks. We top up the medium-sized handbag in which we pack the socks, with shoes and other clothing items. Then we place fruit on top to discourage cops from searching the bag too thoroughly.

"Karri dis," Chibike says to me, handing me a 9 mm pistol. "You know di rules," he says. Then he whispers something to his South African girlfriend, Thandi. She walks slowly out of the room.

“Nigga, if I don’t come back my girlfriend will know what to do wit di rest of di money. If you make it, remind her dat my corpse cannot be buried in a foreign land.”

“We’re going to change money at the blackies right? We go hand them the money, get \$11 000 and we all go home, right?” I ask tremulously.

It’s the first time I see fear in his eyes. Chibike the brave, talkative, strong, proud ... is reduced to a slacker of few words. “Hillbrow is unpredictable. Kristmas period is also di period Nigerian huzzulers become hunted,” he says slowly, his muted despair capsizing my hope.

He asks for a cup of water as if a stranger in his own room. Three short knocks on the door. That’s how Nigerian drug peddlers herald their presence to fellow tradesmen. “Gimme di gun,” he whispers.

Slowly the door opens. Two hulking Nigerians fill the room. One carries a pen and a piece of paper. “Don’t point it at us,” they chorus. Then they begin speaking in Ibo. The face of the one with the writing materials is frozen in a rictus of grief. I can hear a little bit of what they’re saying. Someone killed the wailing one’s brother in Durban. They’ve come to collect money from each Nigerian in the area, to repatriate the body.

Chibike reaches for his special black hat and peels out R1 000 and signs. I tell them I’m not loaded. They vamoose to the next room. As in rural Nigeria, drug peddlers in Johannesburg have meetings where members contribute to the wellbeing of others, especially in the event of a death.

Chibike says Nigerians buried in South Africa were too proud to seek help from their compatriots.

The door swings open again — this time without any knock. Thandi’s carrying something in her handbag. She empties it. A sparkling semi-automatic pistol. Chibike tells me it’s unlicensed. He’s given me his licensed gun so I don’t get into trouble should the cops become involved.

He shoves the semi-automatic into the breast pocket of his brown leather jacket. “Thandi, don’t forget what I told you,” he says to her and embraces her. She’s sobbing.

Outside, some guys are plastering posters on the wall. The posters are of three Nigerians killed in separate incidents. Chibike says at this time of the year one rarely finds a building without posters such as these.

Witberg, along Olivia Road in Hillbrow, is just few blocks away. Chibike insists we take a cab. He gives the driver R100 instead of the normal R20. “If I die, dat’s how he’ll remember me.”

Although the Witberg apartments have been shut down, its previous occupants, Senegalese black market dealers, still skulk in its shadows. Suspecting a West African, the dealers approach passersby, and start negotiating rates. “One for 6.3. Everybody here knows I’m good for it. If you don’t have 6.3, take my 5.7 for one. Don’t let the banks eat you. You’re West African and a foreigner here, don’t be stupid. I’m your reliable banker ... ”

By “one for 6.3 ...”, they’re telling clients they sell \$1 for R6.30 and they buy \$1 for R5.70. The moment they find out you’re a South African, they either scamper into the darkness or offer astronomical rates to scare you off. And should you arouse their suspicion, you’re begging for a bullet.

Clients come from all over greater Johannesburg. Others from other provinces who're flying to their home countries from Johannesburg International Airport, make use of the dealers. The dealers also have agents at the airport — some disguised as trolley-pushers. Their job is to persuade African foreigners to come to Hillbrow and exchange their foreign currency at better rates.

As usual, risk is not in short supply. Some foreigners never get to see Hillbrow. They lose their money at gunpoint before they reach the black market. Others exchange money successfully only to fall prey to scavenging thugs or patrolling cops.

Despite the clear and present dangers involved, it is easy to understand why many African immigrants are cajoled into dealing on the black market and not with legal financial bodies.

The black market offers better rates of exchange than banks and other financial institutions. But that's not all.

For Chibike and many other hustlers the problem is much bigger than opening bank accounts. They all fear their money will be confiscated.

“If you tell di bank you're selling fufu and stew along di pavement an' in tree monts' time you have R70 000 in your bank account, how will di bank react to dat? It's straight confiscation, my brodda.”

Outside Witberg's dark corridors, Chibike makes a call, speaking in broken French. About 10 minutes later a black, luxury sedan with tinted windows pulls over. The door swings open. Chibike gestures for me to sit in front.

“Nang ga def,” I greet the pitch-black figure with thick gold chains wrapped around his neck.

“Denge Wolof?” he asks me back in a thick Senegalese accent. Mbaye is his name. I tell him I speak some Wolof (the common language of Senegal.) He heaves a sigh of relief and asks if I trust the Nigerian, because some Senegalese have recently been killed. I ask him why he does business with somebody he doesn't trust. He says risk is the name of the game.

“Naka ligi yebe?” — “How's business?” I ask. He replies that Allah is great. He tells me we're heading to Kempton Park, on the East Rand, to meet the Russian black market dealers. If the sum to be traded is more than \$5 000 they go to the wholesalers. He says normally he would go to the Pakistanis in Fordsburg, the Chinese in Bruma or the Italians in Norwood. But with the death of the two Senegalese, black market retailers are playing Russian roulette.

We drive to his apartment in Berea. He lives with his Indian girlfriend and the apartment is very oriental. The sofas are expensive. We sit and wait. Quarter-past-eight and Mbaye tells us we leave in 15 minutes. He keeps his money under a thick, red Persian carpet. We root about under the sofas and the carpet and stumble on wads of money.

He refuses to allow us to count the rands. He says he knows exactly how much there is. We stuff the money inside torn soccer balls and squeeze everything into an expensive leather bag. His girlfriend makes some strong Senegalese tea. He offers us two cups and tells us Allah will protect us. He takes off the African dress he is wearing and reveals charms and amulets around his waist and arms. He brags that no bullet can penetrate him.

Then he puts on boots, black jeans and a jacket. There are drawers underneath his bed. He pulls one open. Out come an AK47 and magazines. He loads the AK and throws two full

magazines into the bag of money. He opens another drawer and removes a clarinet case. The third drawer reveals all sorts of medication. He puts syringes, morphine, bandages, plaster and a small iodine bottle inside the clarinet case.

“Dis is for GSW — gunshot wounds. If you get hit, make for de car before it’s too late. My advice: let de bullet go tru your body. I don’t want screaming if de bullet is stock in your body. It’s easier to treat EW — exit wounds.”

We hit the highway to Johannesburg International. “Can you drife at 180 and winding de lef window down?” asks Mbaye.

“You’re crazy,” I shout back. He pulls over on the highway and asks me to take the wheel. He says he wants to show me how to develop double concentration when I’m on the run.

“You have two seconds to look ahead of you and memorise de road and two seconds to reach for de window winder. By de time you reach de winder, de road’s two seconds have past. You hold de winder and look ahead for two seconds again and back at de winder. If you can’t do it, you can’t drive and spray bullets at de same time.”

I try it at 120 km/h, running all over the road to a cacophony of hooting motorists. He urges me to try again. By the time we hit the off-ramp to Pretoria I’ve mastered it. “Now 180. It’s de same technique,” he shouts over a Youssou N’Dour mix playing in the background.

I indicate left as if going to the airport and then head straight to a Kempton Park location where we park outside on the street in front of a white house with a red roof. It’s dark inside. Our only source of light is from a street lamppost.

“Is dis it?” inquires Chibike. Mbaye nods and asks us to cock our guns. “If dey ask to si our stuff witout firs bringing deirs, know it’s a set-up. Shoot your way out of here, or fall forever.”

My heart starts pounding. The silence becomes spooky. The dealers economise in personnel as if wanting each one of us to be the hangman of the other two. “Dey’re watching us, trying to si if we wan to set dem up,” Mbaye whispers.

I’m thinking “ambush”. Looks like Chibike is thinking the same. “Wat’s up with ya guys?” he asks Mbaye, pulling out his gun. Mbaye gets out of the car, digs for a cigarette lighter, lights it and holds it up in the air. Immediately lights are seen inside the house. The gates of Hades flip open. No one need tell us that all who enter, lose hope of redemption.

Chibike is sweating. His eyes scrutinising like a medieval inquisitor; his finger on the trigger. “Nigga, can we trust dem? If you make it out of here, don’t forget what I told you at Parklane. My bodi cannot be buried in South Africa.”

“Welkom, three kings. My name is Dubronovich. Vwee spoke on ze phone. Jhust call me Dubro as in Diablo.” He’s a huge unkempt Russian with tattooed forearms. He lets us see his gun tucked in his tight-fitting jeans. “Zis is Katarina. She is strip-tease in our club in Bedfordview. And zis of course is Balakov. He is short, but very good fighter.”

We make our way into an elaborately furnished East European-style living room. Dubro reaches for a remote and blasts gangster rapper 50 Cent’s Get Rich or Die Trying. “Okay, let Katarina do drinks. I bring zer papers.”

He comes back with three blue travelling bags. “Kongratulation, you zust won jhackpot,” he says throwing the bags at us. The smell of blood and methylated spirits rises from the bags.

“Some of zer money is clean. Odder not. Is one for 5.5. You make point-five profit. Now, are Roshans not best? Vwhy you buy from dose Italians? Zay fucking rob you,” he says, crashing heavily onto a sofa.

Chibike empties his bag. “Seventy tousan. Clean.”

“Good. Zer is \$13 000 in zat bag and \$20 000 in odder two. You can keep change,” says Dubro tearing open the bags.

Mbaye insists on cleaning the bloodstained notes before leaving. Chibike wants us to leave ASAP. “I’m not going to count yor money. It better be right or vwee coming to Hillbrow,” continues Dubro.

Spending so much time in the underworld has skewed dealers’ visions of evil. Murder, kidnapping or petty brutality are not in their purview. Instead, they’ve developed heightened sensitivity to homely transgressions like cheating or failing to keep a promise.

The Russian dealers loan money to those who’ve been blacklisted, pawnshop and nightclub owners, moneylenders and car dealers with no collateral to secure bank loans. Clients pay back in dollars — usually after losing a lot of blood. The dollars are traded to black market retailers.

Dubro is a debt collector. He says they beat up a loan shark who borrowed money from them and his blood spilled on the notes. I watch Chibike and Mbaye dip cotton into some liquid and rub off the blood.

Moments later, without a rumour of a blush, Katarina asks if I’ve ever had a “Roshan” massage. I shake my head. She gestures me upstairs. The music upstairs is Sergei Rachmaninov’s Adagio Sostenuto, Concerto for Piano and Orchestra Number 2 in C minor, Opus 18.

A few minutes after she begins straddling me, rubbing her warm and soft breasts on my back, I notice two shadows inside the room. I push her around to get a clearer view. Two pistols are on my skull. Katarina soon adds hers.

“You are not black market dealer. Vwee see it in your eyes. Vwhy are you here?” It’s Balakov. Before I utter a word they cock their guns.

“Who are you? Tell us or vwee take you to basement.”

“Easy guys. The cameras say he entered here without a gun. He is a man of peace,” says an elderly Russian standing in the doorway. The guns are withdrawn. “If you’ve never spilled blood before, don’t flirt with the devil. We always observe people doing business with us. When you refused to touch blood money my men began feeling uneasy. If you’re in this business, blood becomes like water. Let him continue with the massage.”

I refuse, telling them I’ve had enough. I join Mbaye and Chibike downstairs and ask if we can go.

The Russians are laughing on their way down the stairs. I’m too shaken to handle the steering wheel. Mbaye speeds us off back to safe Hillbrow.

Back at the hotel, Chibike counts the dollars. \$13 000. Two thousand more than he'd expected. "Nigga, we've journied togedder. Here's some bush for us." I decline the trophy. "Give it to the brother of the Nigerian who got killed in Durban. It's my contribution to send the corpse home."

"What happened upstairs, Nigga, you never tol mi."

"The Russians had a gun to my head."

"Was dat your firs time? Did you feel dat headache?"

"Di street huzzulers have a name for dat," he says. "We call it fire in the brains."