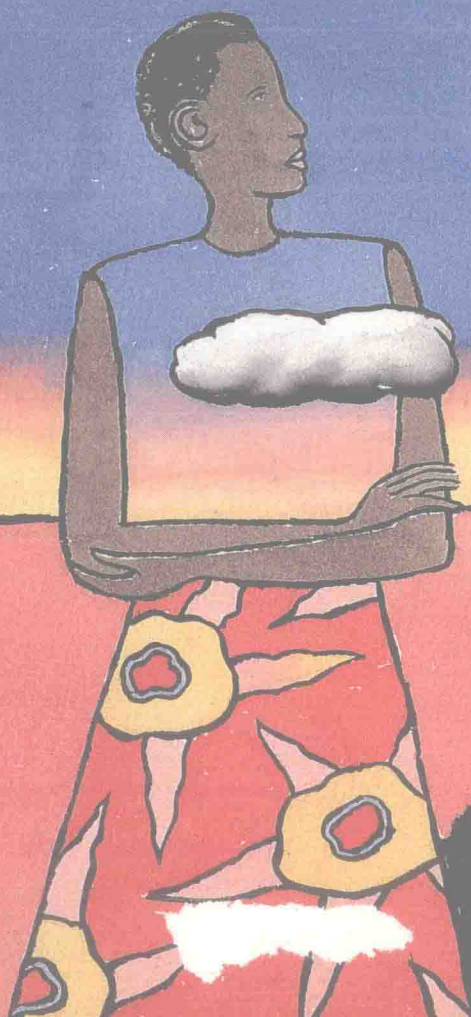


# Bessie Head

## When Rain Clouds Gather

One of South Africa's most remarkable writers



BESSIE HEAD

WHEN RAIN CLOUDS  
GATHER



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BESSIE HEAD, one of Africa's best-known women writers, was born in 1937, the result of an 'illicit' union between a black man and a white woman. Her life was a traumatic one, and she drew heavily upon her own personal experiences for her novels. She was sent to a foster family until she was 13, and then a mission school before training as a teacher. After four years teaching she left to work as a journalist for *Drum* magazine, but an unsuccessful marriage and her involvement in the trial of a friend lead her to apply for another teaching post, in Botswana, where she took up permanent exile. She remained there, with the precarious status of 'refugee', for 15 years before she gained citizenship in 1979, and it was in Botswana that Bessie Head died tragically early, aged 49, in 1986.

Botswana is the backdrop for all three of her outstanding novels. *When Rain Clouds Gather*, her first novel, based on her time as a refugee living at the Bamangwato Development Farm, was published in 1969. This was followed by *Maru* (1971) and her intense and powerful, autobiographical work *A Question of Power* (1973). Her short stories appeared as *The Collector of Treasures* in 1977, and in 1981, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* was published; a skilful and original historical portrait of 100 years of a Botswanan community, reconstructed through the words of different members of the village. *A Woman Alone* (1990), a collection of Bessie Head's autobiographical writings, and *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1990), a moving selection of famous and previously unpublished works, have been published posthumously and are available from Heinemann.

FOR  
Pat and Wendy Cullinan,  
Pat and Liz Van Rensburg,  
“HOORAY!” and U-Shaka,  
and for Naomi Mitchison, who loves Botswana.

## NOTE

**Bantu languages use prefixes thus :**

**Botswana is the name of the country;**

**The Batswana are the Tswana people who live there;**

**A Motswana is an individual member of the Tswana tribe.**

## CHAPTER I

THE LITTLE Barolong village swept right up to the border fence. One of the huts was built so close that a part of its circular wall touched the barbed-wire fencing. In this hut a man had been sitting since the early hours of dawn. He was waiting until dark when he would try to sprint across the half-mile gap of no-man's-land to the Botswana border fence and then on to whatever illusion of freedom lay ahead. It was June and winter and bitterly cold, and his legs were too long to allow for pacing in the cramped space of the hut. Every half hour the patrol van of the South African border police sped past with sirens wailing, and this caused an unpleasant sensation in his stomach.

I'll soon have a stomach-ache if I go on like this, he thought.

His nerves weren't so good, too easily jangled by the irritations of living. In fact, the inner part of him was a jumble of chaotic discord, very much belied by his outer air of calm, lonely self-containment. The only way you could sense this inner discord was through a trick he had of slightly averting his face as though no man was his brother or worthy of trust. Otherwise, his face was rather pleasing to the eye. It was often wryly amused. Its general expression was one of absorbed, attentive listening. His long thin falling-away cheekbones marked him as a member of either the Xhosa or Zulu tribe.

Towards noon, when there was a lull in the wailing sirens, the old man who owned the hut pushed open the door, letting in a shaft of sunlight. He held in his hands a steaming bowl of thick porridge. The man by now had a dreadful stomach-ache, and the sight of the food did not immediately please him.

"Well, how are you, son?" the old man asked.

"I'm all right," the man lied. It did not seem quite dignified to admit that he had stomach trouble.

"I've brought you a little food," the old man said.

"Thank you," the man said. "But could I go out for a while and stretch my legs?" He had to ease the painful knots in his stomach.

"It's not safe," the old man said. "I can't guarantee who may or may not be a spy. Once you are caught here it will make it unsafe for those who come on behind. I would no doubt go to jail too."

The young man was bent over the small hand-carved stool on which he sat, and the old man thought he might be cold.

"Why not take a little brandy?" he asked sympathetically. "I know a place nearby, and I can send for some if you want it."

The man looked up, relieved, and nodded his head. He took out a pound note and handed it to the old man. The old man smiled widely. He had not known of one fugitive yet who did not need it. Besides, with a little brandy inside they soon became talkative, and he liked all the stories. He stored them up against the day when he would be free to surprise his village with his vast fund of information on fugitives. He closed the door and shuffled away. A dog barked nearby. There was the chatter of women's voices, and music and singing. A child began to cry loudly. Men laughed, and the man in the hut was briefly surprised that a whole village could live in the wail of those sirens that had tied his stomach in such tight knots. Soon the old man shuffled back again. Because relief was near at hand he noticed how the dust of the mud floor rose up and shimmered and danced in the sunlight as the old man pushed open the door. The old man had not only the brandy but a bowl of food for himself as well. It pleased the young man in the shadows that he did not close the door because as soon as he had taken a few careful sips from the bottle, he could clearly discern the gentle, interweaving dance pattern of the sunlit dust. The slow, almost breathless rhythm eased away the knots of stomach trouble, and he unconsciously smiled to himself in this sudden warm glow of expansive relief that was now his abdomen.

Noting this the old man said, "I say, son, what's your name?"

"Makhaya," the young man replied.

The old man screwed up his eyes, perplexed. The sound and



meaning of the name were unfamiliar to him. Tswana-speaking tribes dominated the northern Transvaal.

"I don't know it," the old man said, shaking his head.

"It's Zulu," the young man said. "I'm a Zulu." And he laughed sarcastically at the thought of calling himself a Zulu.

"But you speak Tswana fluently," the old man persisted.

Quite drunk by now the young man said rather crazily, "Yes, we Zulus are like that. Since the days of Shaka we've assumed that the whole world belongs to us; that's why we trouble to learn any man's language. But look here, old man, I'm no tribal-ist. My parents are—that's why they saddled me with this foolish name. Why not call me Samuel or Johnson, because I'm no tribal-ist."

"Jo!" said the old man, using a Tswana expression of surprise. "And what's wrong with the tribe?"

"I have a list of grievances against it. I haven't got time to go into them now..." He paused, trying to collect his thoughts in the haze of brandy that was clouding his brain. "Makhaya," he said. "That tribal name is the wrong one for me. It is for one who stays home, yet they gave it to me and I have not known a day's peace and contentment in my life."

"It's because of education," the old man said, nodding his head wisely. "They should not have given you the education. Take away the little bit of education and you will be only too happy to say, 'Mama, please find me a tribal girl and let us plough.' It's only the education that turns a man away from his tribe."

The conversation threatened to become a vast, meaningless, rambling digression. Good storyteller that he was, the old man brought it back to the main points at hand. Why was the young man here? What was he fleeing from? A jail sentence, perhaps?

The young man looked at him suspiciously. "I'm just out of jail," he said. He closed the brandy bottle and picked up the bowl of porridge. And then some anxiety seemed to jolt him for he put the bowl down again, searched the inside pocket of his coat, and took out a little scrap of paper. He struck a match and burned the paper. Then he picked up the bowl of porridge and would not utter another word. The old man was left to put two and two

together. Perhaps scraps of paper and jail sentences were the same thing in the young man's mind. Why did he jump so at the thought of one tiny scrap? And what was this about tribalism? What about the white man who was the only recognized enemy of everyone?

"Oh, so you have no complaints about the white man?" the old man said, struggling to pry some information out of the tightly shut mouth.

The young man only turned his face slightly, yet the light of laughter danced in his eyes.

"Ha, I see now," the old man said, pretending disappointment. "You are running away from tribalism. But just ahead of you is the worst tribal country in the world. We Barolongs are neighbours of the Batswana, but we cannot get along with them. They are a thick-headed lot who think no further than this door. Tribalism is meat and drink to them."

The young man burst out laughing. "Oh, Papa," he said. "I just want to step on free ground. I don't care about people. I don't care about anything, not even the white man. I want to feel what it is like to live in a free country and then maybe some of the evils in my life will correct themselves."

The wail of the approaching sirens sounded again. After they had swept past, the old man left the hut, closing the door behind him. Makhaya was left alone with his thoughts, and since these threatened to trouble him, he kept on numbing them with a little brandy sipped straight from the bottle.

The sun set early in winter and by seven o'clock it was pitch dark. Makhaya made ready to cross the patch of no-man's-land. The two border fences were seven-foot-high barriers of close, tautly drawn barbed wire. He waited in the hut until he heard the patrol van pass. Then he removed his heavy overcoat and stuffed it into a large leather bag. He stepped out of the hut and pitched the leather bag over the fence, grasped hold of the barbed wire, and heaved himself up and over. Picking up his bag, he ran as fast as he could across the patch of ground to the other fence, where he repeated the performance. Then he was in Botswana.

In his anxiety to get as far away from the border as fast as

possible, he hardly felt the intense, penetrating cold of the frosty night. For almost half an hour he sped, blind and deaf and numbed to anything but his major fear. The wail of the siren brought him to an abrupt halt. It sounded shockingly near and he feared that his crashing pace would draw attention to himself. But the lights of the patrol van swept past and he knew, from timing the patrols throughout the long torturous day, that he had another half hour of safety ahead of him. As he relaxed a little, his mind grasped the fact that he had been sucking in huge gulps of frozen air and that his lungs were flaming with pain. He removed the heavy coat from the bag and put it on. He also took a few careful sips from the brandy bottle and then continued on his way at a more leisurely pace.

He had not walked more than a few paces when he again came to an abrupt halt. The air was full of the sound of bells, thousands and thousands of bells, tinkling and tinkling with a purposeful, monotonous rhythm. Yet there was not a living thing in sight to explain where the sound was coming from. He was quite sure that around him and in front of him were trees and more trees, thorn trees that each time he approached too near ripped at his clothes. But how to explain the bells, unearthly sounding bells in an apparently unlivable wasteland?

Oh, God, I'm going crazy, he thought.

He looked up at the stars. They winked back at him, silently, blandly. He could even make out some of the star patterns of the southern constellations. Surely, if his mind was suddenly disordered through the tensions of the day, the stars would appear disordered too? Surely everything became mixed up to a person who had just lost his mind? He shook his head, but the bells continued their monotonous, rhythmic tinkling. He knew some pretty horrifying stories about tribal societies and their witch doctors who performed their ghoulish rites by night. But witch doctors were human, and nothing, however odd and perverse, need be feared if it was human. Taking this as a possible explanation of the bells restored his balance, and he continued on his way, keeping an alert eye open for the fires or huts of the witch doctors.

Soon he saw a fire in the bush, a small bit of self-contained light in the overwhelming darkness. He headed straight for it, and as he approached, the flickering, crackling light outlined the shape of two mud huts and the forms of a woman and a child. It was the woman who looked up as she became aware of approaching footsteps. He stood still, not wishing to alarm her. She appeared to be very old. Her small eyes were completely sunk in the wrinkles of her face. The child was a girl of about ten who kept her head bent, idly drawing a pattern with a stick on the ground. He greeted the old woman in Tswana, politely calling her mother in a quiet, reassuring voice.

She did not return the greeting. Instead she demanded, "Yes, what do you want?" She had a loud, shrill, uncontrolled voice, and he disliked her immediately.

"I was looking for shelter for the night," he said.

She kept quiet, yet stared fixedly at the direction from which his voice came. Then she burst out in that loud, jarring voice, "I say you are one of the spies from over the border."

Since he did not respond she became quite excited, raising her voice even louder. "Why else do people wander about at night, unless they are spies? All the spies in the world are coming into our country. I tell you, you are a spy! You are a spy!"

It was the shouting that unnerved him. The border was still very near, and at any moment now the patrol van would pass.

"How can you embarrass me like this?" he said in a quiet, desperate voice. "Are women of your country taught to shout at men?"

"I'm not shouting," she shrilled, but in a slightly lower voice. His words and consistently quiet speech were beginning to impress her.

"Well, my ears must be deceiving me, mother," he said, amused. "Tell me whether you can offer me shelter or not. I'm no spy. I've just lost my way in the darkness."

The fixed stare never wavered. She said, curtly, "I have a spare hut. You may use it but only for tonight. You must also pay. I want ten shillings."

She held out a shrivelled old hand, cold and hard with years

and years of labour. He stepped towards the fire and handed her a ten-shilling note. She reached behind her for a small carved stool and said, "Sit here. The child will sweep the hut and put down some blankets."

The child stood up obediently and disappeared into one of the huts. He sat down opposite the crude, rude phenomenon who continued staring at him. The wail of the patrol siren again sounded quite near, almost behind his back. He held her glance calmly.

"I know you are a spy," she said. "You are running away from them."

He smiled. "Perhaps you just want to annoy me. But as you can see, I'm not easily annoyed."

"Where do you come from?" she asked.

"From over the border," he said. "I have an appointment to start work in this country tomorrow."

"Why didn't you come by train?" she asked suspiciously.

"But my home is so near, in the Barolong village," he lied.

She turned her head and spat on the ground as an eloquent summing up of what she thought of him. Then she sat with her head averted as though she had abruptly dismissed him from her thoughts. The bells were still tinkling away.

"What are all those bells for?" he asked.

"They are tied around the necks of the cattle because they are grazing freely in the bush," she said.

He felt ashamed at the thought of how they had terrified him and they were only cow bells. He also wanted to laugh out loud, and to suppress this he said conversationally, "I'm not an owner of cattle. I suppose the bells are there to locate them if they get lost?"

"Of course," she said scornfully. "Cattle wander a great distance while grazing."

Meanwhile the child had crept quietly back to the fireside. Half-consciously his gaze wandered in her direction, and he was startled to find the child looking at him with a full bold stare. There was something very unchildlike about it and it displeased him. His glance flickered back to the old woman. She was staring

again and he even imagined that he saw a gleam in the sunken old eyes.

My God, he thought, what a pair of vultures they are.

Aloud he said, "Is the room ready now, mother?"

She merely turned and pointed to one of the huts. He stood up immediately, relieved to be rid of their unpleasant company. He struck a match as he entered the dark hut. It seemed to be a storage shed. A large grain basket stood in one corner, and there were a number of earthenware pots encircling the room. A space had been cleared on the floor on which were placed wide square covers made of animal skins. He struck another match to take a better look at what he was to sleep on. The feel of it was like thick soft velvet, squares upon squares of the sewn-together skins of hundreds of wild animals. He only removed his shoes and overcoat. The overcoat he flung over the top cover for extra warmth. The bed seemed well worth ten shillings to him because it was very warm.

He lay on his back staring up at the dark, too tense to sleep. A good gulp of brandy would have knocked him out cold but he dared not touch it. He distrusted the suspicious old hag. She seemed to know too much about the border. What would prevent her from stepping down there and informing the police? There was good money in it, if she knew about that too. A cold sweat broke out on him as he imagined her at the fence, shouting at the patrol van. And what about the child and her awful, unchild-like stare? He listened alertly to their every movement. For a time there was a low murmured conversation, and then he heard the fire being scraped out. Then the door of the next hut was pushed open. The old hag coughed a bit. There was more murmured conversation and a brief silence. Then the door was opened again and he could tell that it was the child who had gone out because the old hag was coughing inside.

He lay quite still as the door of his hut was carefully and quietly pushed open by the child and equally quietly and carefully closed behind her. She dropped lightly down on her knees and moved her hands over the covers until they reached his face.

"What do you want?" he asked.

The hands did  
said, "You know"  
"I don't," he \_\_\_\_\_

silence; then she

She kept quiet as though puzzling this out. At last she said, "My grandmother won't mind as long as you pay me."

"Go away," he said, abashed, humiliated. "You're just a child."

But she just sat there and would not move. He really could not stand it. He raised himself and struck a match and took out a ten-shilling note and handed it to her.

"Here's the money," he said fiercely. "Now go away."

Her eyes were wide and uncomprehending in the brief glare of the match, but she grasped the note and fled. From the hut next door he heard the brief plaintive explanation of the child and the loud surprised chatter of the old woman.

"You mean he gave you the money for nothing?" she said, beside herself with excitement. "This is a miracle! I have not yet known a man who did not regard a woman as a gift from God! He must be mad! I knew it all along in my heart that he was mad! Let us lock the door to protect ourselves from the mad-man!"

What a loathsome woman, he thought, and yet how naïve she was in her evil. He had known many such evils in his lifetime. He thought they were created by poverty and oppression, and he had spent the last two years in jail in the belief that, in some way, a protest would help to set the world right. It was the mentality of the old hag that ruined a whole continent—some sort of clinging, ancestral, tribal belief that a man was nothing more than a grovelling sex organ, that there was no such thing as privacy of soul and body, and that no ordinary man would hesitate to jump on a mere child.

He had sisters at home, one almost the same age as the child and some a few years older. But he was the eldest in the family, and according to custom he had to be addressed as "Buti", which means "Elder Brother", and treated with exaggerated respect. As soon as his father died he made many changes in the home, foremost of which was that his sisters should address him by his first name and associate with him as equals and friends. When his

mother had protested he had merely said, "Why should men be brought up with a false sense of superiority over women? People can respect me if they wish, but only if I earn it."

For all his strange new ideas, the family had not wanted to part with him. In fact he had left his mother in a state of complete collapse, and though at the time he had pretended to be unmoved by all the tears and sighs, it was all this that had made him drink brandy throughout the afternoon. His reasons for leaving were simple: he could not marry and have children in a country where black men were called "boy" and "dog" and "kaffir". The continent of Africa was vast without end and he simply felt like moving out of a part of it that was mentally and spiritually dead through the constant perpetuation of false beliefs.

I might like it here, was his last thought before falling into a deep, exhausted sleep.

It was not yet dawn when he arose and left. In the faint early light he saw a little footpath leading away from the huts, and because it wound its way northward and away from the border, he decided to follow it in the hope that it would lead him somewhere.

At first not a thing stirred around him. It was just his own self, his footsteps and the winding footpath. Even the sunrise took him by surprise. Somehow he had always imagined the sun above hills, shining down into valleys and waking them up. But here the land was quite flat, and the sunshine crept along the ground in long shafts of gold light. It kept on pushing back the darkness that clung around the trees, and always the huge splash of gold was split into shafts by the trees. Suddenly, the sun sprang clear of all entanglements, a single white pulsating ball, dashing out with one blow the last traces of the night. So sudden and abrupt was the sunrise that the birds had to pretend they had been awake all the time. They set up a shrill piercing clamour all at once, thousands and thousands of them. For all their clamour they turned out to be small dun-coloured creatures with speckled dun-coloured breasts, and their flight into the deep blue sky was just like so many tiny insects. More secretive types of birds lived in the depth of the bush, and these were very beautiful, ranging in



colour from a shimmering midnight blue to bright scarlet and molten gold. Unlike the chattering little dun-coloured fellows, they called to each other in soft low tones and, being curious about his footsteps, frequently flashed briefly on to the footpath ahead of him.

I wonder what the birds live on, he thought. The land on either side of the footpath was loose windblown sand and thornbush. Often the thornbush emerged as tall, straight-trunked trees, topped by an umbrella of black, exquisitely shaped branches, but more often it grew in short low tufts like rough wild grass. Long white thorns grew on the branches, at the base of which were tightly packed clusters of pale olive-green leaves. And that was all. As far as the eye could see it was only a vast expanse of sand and scrub but somehow bewitchingly beautiful. Perhaps he confused it with his own loneliness. Perhaps it was those crazy little birds. Perhaps it was the way the earth had adorned herself for a transient moment in a brief splurge of gold. Or perhaps he simply wanted a country to love and chose the first thing at hand. But whatever it was, he simply and silently decided that all this dryness and bleakness amounted to home and that somehow he had come to the end of a journey.

The little footpath spilled out suddenly on to a wide dirt road, and he had not walked far before a truck came lumbering up behind him. Like the gaudy-hued birds, the truck driver was curious about such an early traveller. He stopped the truck and called out, "Are you going to the station?"

"Yes," Makhaya said.

"It's always best to start early in the morning because the journey is long," the man said. "But you are lucky this time, I can give you a lift."

Later, he blessed the man silently. By truck it was a two-hour journey with not a hut or a living being in sight. On foot it might well have taken the whole day. The only discomfort about the journey was that he had to invent lie after lie. The truck driver was talkative and kept on prying into his personal affairs.

"You've been to see relatives at the meraka?" the truck driver asked.