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WISE

*Contemporary stories  
by Australian women*

*edited by  
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Bruce Pascoe  
& Paula White*



## *Lyn Hughes*

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# The Plain Clothes Man

**J**onas Msinga worked for the Church of our Father in Dreifontein. Five days a week he walked the pavements of the white suburbs, collecting clothes and money for the church. This was not entirely a charitable exercise on his part, although if challenged he would have vehemently denied any self-motivation. Citing hostile dogs, the heat, the arduous nature of his work, not to mention the white rebuffs and hostility which was his daily lot. Ai, no man would willingly subject himself to this, day in, day out, without the love of his brother being uppermost in his heart. So his mother praised him to neighbours, friends and anyone else who would listen. 'God has placed his finger upon Jonas' heart,' she would say with barely restrained pride. Once Mrs Msinga had had other hopes for Jonas. Moses Thembela had done well for himself in the mines. Amos Tzimvimbulu had risen to undreamed of heights, only recently being appointed a Storeman with a big city firm. But Mrs Msinga was well content. Few, she knew, were chosen and Jonas was one of the few. Sometimes she did wonder why her only son had been singled out amongst his peers but, she would remind herself, 'God works in mysterious ways.'

Jonas looked up at the hot blue sky, shielding his dark eyes from the glare, and gripped his plastic carrier bag more firmly. Enoch Dlutu, his next-door neighbour, was leaning against the wire fence that fronted the dusty road, his arms dangling loosely before him, his fat stomach straining at the buttons of his shirt. 'Ai, Jonas,' he smiled broadly, 'you still collecting for that church, man?' Jonas shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly and smiled in return. 'A man tries to help his brothers, Enoch,' he said mildly. Enoch's smile broadened. 'Ai, talking of help, Jonas, you got another of those nice shirts for me?' Jonas

glanced quickly back towards his house but his mother had already turned and the front door was shut. 'Enoch, I know you're hard-up, man,' he hissed, 'and I tried to help you out of Christian kindness. And now you want to tell the whole street!' Enoch looked puzzled but quickly recovered his smile, 'Sure, Jonas,' he said in subdued voice, 'just between you and me, but my brother Joseph is getting married next week and he needs a new shirt. He gets paid on Friday, he can give you the money then.' Jonas frowned, 'I'll see what I can do for your brother, Enoch, but I can't promise mind. Some weeks pass without my seeing the cuff of a shirt. Some weeks I'm lucky to run fast enough from the dogs!'

'Aice, it's a hard life,' Enoch agreed without any trace of sympathy in his voice. Jonas gave a dismissive wave of his hand and walked on and Enoch remained leaning against the fence, looking after him. He smiled to himself. Ai, that Jonas! Everyone in the township knew of his wheelings and dealings. Why, only last week his wife had seen Mrs Empela wearing a new checked coat that only a white woman could have had the money for. And he was paid two Rands a day by Father Terblanche. It was enough to make any man take to God, he reflected. He yawned widely and stretched his arms above his head. Ai, he felt pretty sure Jonas would manage a shirt for Joseph. Perhaps he should have asked him about trousers, too. Still, not to milk any cow dry.

Jonas stood on the train and thought of Enoch with distaste. A man tried to help his brother and what did he get in return. Now he must help his brother's brother, and then there'd be no end to it. He tried to do what he could, a shirt here, a coat there. But always giving a full bag to Father Terblanche each day. There was no end to their greed. Well, Joseph could go to his wedding in an old shirt and that was the end of it. Why only yesterday old Themba had asked him for a pair of shoes! The train was full, Jonas had never known it any other way, but this morning he found himself gradually being pressed by the packed bodies into the back of a woman. He tried to distance himself, drawing his long arms in towards his body, but the

pressure continued until he fitted quite snugly into the contours of her body. Jonas felt alarmed. He looked down at the head slightly below his and his teeth clenched. The dark cropped head was young, rounded and elongated into a neck that was unusually white, and soft. He didn't know how he knew the softness of that neck but he could almost feel its pale silk under his fingers. He gritted his teeth, holding himself as rigidly as he could. Ai, would they never stop! Greed and soft skin mingled uneasily to bring the sweat onto his forehead. He was imprisoned. He couldn't even reach for his handkerchief to wipe away the sweat that had begun to dribble into his eyes. Jonas, in his alarm, searched for some thought to banish this Eve, this apparition of sin on the morning train. 'Blessed are the meek for,' the downy hairs on her neck were darker than the surrounding skin, 'Though I walk in the shadow,' her shoulders were narrow, delicate as, 'Lead me not into the ways of,' he could almost feel every bone in her thin body . . . There was a sudden screeching of brakes and the train stopped abruptly, throwing people violently against one another. Jonas felt a sharp blow to his ribs from the woman in front and then he was pushed bodily towards the door. He stood unsteadily on the platform, weakly resisting the engulfing black wave. The woman had disappeared and he stood for a while watching the receding crowd. No doubt a cheap woman, who bleached that fine skin with Karroo Cream and smoked and drank like a white woman! Ai, these loose women, surely the day of retribution would net them from their sea of sin. Slowly his pulse returned to normal and he took a folded handkerchief from his suit pocket and wiped his face thoroughly, and then his wet hands.

He took a bus from the station to Swartfontein. Father Terblanche had warned him not to collect from the wealthy Johannesburg suburbs, Houghton and their like. 'It's hard to explain, Jonas,' he'd said wearily, 'why the rich find it harder to give than the poor.' Jonas hadn't questioned his words, he knew well enough the trained dogs, the high glass-topped walls that barricaded the rich even from their white brothers. He was quite content to ply the

middle-class suburbs, changing each week from one to another. Not that it would have mattered if he'd approached the same house week after week, his black skin gave him anonymity in white eyes. His damp shirt stuck to his back and he sat morosely ignoring the overtures of the man seated beside him in the bus. Everyone wanted something from him, he thought irritably. Enoch, who thought he could produce shirts from thin air. Themba, who begged shoes. Did Themba think of *his* feet, blistered and aching from walking, day in, day out. A man could bear much for Christ, but sometimes a brother's burdens weighed heavily. And a woman could test the will of the strongest man, flaunting soft skin for a stranger to . . . He shifted in his seat, taking out the crumpled handkerchief again and wiping his face roughly. Ai, this heat! It softened a man's brain. He must be strong in Christ, he knew these lewd thoughts were the devils own sent to test him.

By midday Jonas' carrier bag was half full and he made his way to a familiar street corner and sat down on the wide grass verge. On the opposite corner a group of nannies sat in their neat uniforms and doeks, some accompanied by their white charges. Jonas waved his hand, recognising a few, but ignored their calls for him to join them. Let them think what they liked, he was in no mood for their idle chatter. He ate his sandwiches without appetite, idly watching the play of light on the shimmering tarmac. The women had become noisier now and two men, one of whom he recognised as Mlamleli, the gardener at No. 54, had joined them. Relenting, Jonas stood up with a sigh and wiped the grass from his suit. He crossed the street and sat down beside the two men, a little apart from the women. Mlamleli introduced him to the young man sitting beside him. Jonas hadn't seen him before, he was sure. He was one you wouldn't soon forget. He was sharply dressed, his thin legs moulded into faded jeans, his hairless chest exposed in the vee of a bright red shirt. A gold medallion hung from his sinewy neck. A city man by his look, Jonas thought disapprovingly. A ladies man he could tell, from the banter he was exchanging with a pretty young woman who was laughing immoderately. Jonas had relented

knowing how much he depended upon groups such as this, that gathered on street corners all over the white suburbs. He valued and often used their information. 'Don't bother with No. 32, the missus works all day.' 'No. 34, she's okay, she'll give a little something.' 'No. 36, now she's a mean bitch, with a look that could sour milk.' So much they observed unknown to their white Madams, who thought them inanimate as the furniture they polished and cleaned. The groups bound them together in an environment that was alien and barely tolerated them. Dora, an enormous woman with a pock-marked face called to him. 'Hey, Jonas, there's a new Madam at No. 40. You should try there, last week she gave money to my daughter's school.' Jonas thanked her politely. And then, in amazement, he watched as Dora took a white baby who had been grizzling in its pram and drew the child into the folds of her vast stomach. Brazenly unbuttoning her uniform she offered the child her own breast. The baby sucked greedily and was quiet. Dora drew a blanket around them both, hiding her from Jonas' disapproving stare and any passers by. 'Now don't you start, Jonas Msinga,' Dora said defensively. 'My Madam won't give her the breast. Shame on her! Every day she's out shopping or visiting and she leaves me with the baby. "Feed the baby, Dora. Warm the bottle, Dora. Not too hot, not too cold." "Yes Madam . . . yes, Madam . . . Aiee, Madam!" And then the baby cries. I can't bear the baby crying, such a thin baby too, all bones. And all I have for her is a bottle. So one day I give her the breast. My Madam would kill me if she knew! And now the Madam says, "Dora, you're a real treasure. The baby is so contented with you." So the Madam's happy and the baby's happy. Now, what's wrong with that Jonas, you tell me! I've had six babies of my own and I never knew one that could tell the difference between white milk or black!' she finished with a sour laugh. The other women laughed with her and Jonas exclaimed hotly, 'What's wrong, you ask, Dora! Going behind your Madam's back is what's wrong. Why do you hide the baby behind your blanket, if it's right?' he added sternly. Dora shifted uncomfortably. 'Aiee, Jonas, but the white Madams are so cold,' she said

sulkily. The city man who had been listening to their conversation suddenly joined in with a hoot of laughter. 'Aikona, Dora,' he said loudly, 'not all the white Madams are so cold! Some are hot as hell-fire, believe me!' The pretty young woman gave a shriek of laughter and covered her face with one hand, looking coyly through her fingers at him. 'Ai, listen, it's true man,' he said seriously, taking Jonas' blank look as one of disbelief. But Jonas turned away in disgust. This man confirmed his worst fears. Johannesburg had become the breeding ground of sin, spawning men such as this who openly bragged of fornicating with a white woman. And Jonas was shocked at the niggling worm of envy that had stirred in him at the man's shameless words. Such was a day a man had to live through, he thought with sudden realisation. Surely the devil himself had come to tempt him. The women began to disperse and Dora placed the baby back in its pram. 'Jonas, remember No. 40,' she called after him. Jonas, walking slowly up the street, acknowledged her with a wave, but didn't turn. His feet felt leaden and unready for the afternoon that stretched endless as the hot tarmac before him.

For most of the afternoon he avoided No. 40. Not deliberately, but he approached other houses, houses in parallel streets, in streets that intersected the one that contained No. 40, for something held him back. One who had given money last week would be unwilling to do so this week, he reasoned. The pickings in that particular street were often lean. He would stick to his regular houses, his regular Madams. Surely it was better not to deviate from routine on a day such as this. But by late afternoon his bag was barely full, and he had no shirt for Joseph. Dora had often proved reliable in the past, he conceded, as he finally made his way up the neat brick path. The house was set back from the road on a wide swathe of lawn and there was no brick wall, no 'Beware of the Dog', 'Hawkers Prohibited', signs to justify his uneasiness. He leaned against the stuccoed white wall and held his hand on the doorbell, hoping that the Madam was out. That he could turn his back and leave the solid door closed under its canopy of bright bougainvillea.



She opened it almost at once, a thin young woman dressed in brief shorts and a loose shirt. Jonas was unnerved by her proximity. There was no security door separating them, no spy-hole to secretly observe an unwanted supplicant. She had opened door, sight unseen, to a stranger and stood smiling, the corners of her blue eyes creased, one brown hand fiddling with some strands of dark hair that had unravelled from a loose knot. Jonas looked over his shoulder, but he was alone. The smile was for him. He met her eyes uneasily and then looked down, stubbing the doormat nervously with a black shoe. He didn't want her to think him brazen or impolite. Strangely it seemed important what she thought. Her smile was joined by a puzzled lift of one eyebrow and Jonas fumbled in his pocket for his donation book. She took it and pointed to the official rubber stamp. 'You're collecting for the Church?' she asked. Her voice was strange, sweet and musical, he thought suddenly. The poetic turn of thought threw him into confusion. 'Ai, Madam,' he said looking past her. 'If you could give a little something? Old clothes. Perhaps a little money.' He couldn't meet her eyes, unnerved by the fluttering lightness in his belly. She handed the book to him and he took it gingerly, avoiding the long brown fingers, the blunt white nails. She smiled again, reassuringly, as though she guessed his discomposure. 'I think I've got some old clothes for you. David has some old shirts, they're missing a few buttons though, I'm afraid.' She tucked the loose strands of hair into place. 'I could look now, if you don't mind waiting?' she said. 'No, no,' Jonas said eagerly, 'the Madam's very kind.' She turned, leaving the front door open. Jonas stood on the doorstep, annoyed at his ingratiating tone. He had anticipated a challenge, a wary scrutiny, a pointed locking of the security door. How could any Madam be this reckless, turning her back on a stranger? Someone like the city man would walk softly through that gaping hole and steal. Money, a radio. Or worse. Someone like the city man would take a welcoming smile as an invitation he thought in confusion. 'Some Madams are as hot as hell-fire, believe me!' Jonas turned but he was alone. There was only the bougainvillea, rustling in the afternoon breeze.

She came to the door carrying an armful of clothes. 'I've been waiting for a chance to get rid of these,' she laughed. 'David can't bring himself to throw anything out.' She spoke to him casually, as she might speak to a neighbour, he thought wonderingly. Perhaps this white Madam came from some other place. He had heard there were lands where whites and blacks lived together. He had heard, but hardly believed. He took the clothes from her and stuffed them into the plastic bag, mumbling his thanks. And he turned to go, unwillingly. There was no reason to remain and yet he looked for some opening, a wedge to drive into the closing door. 'Ai, Madam, it's been so hot today. Perhaps the Madam has a glass of water for me?' It was inspiration, breaking every rule Father Terblanche had instilled. Not to bother the whites, not to endanger their continuing charity. 'Don't ever make a nuisance of yourself.' Jonas could hardly believe the words were his own. But she didn't falter. 'Of course,' she said pleasantly, and was gone. Almost immediately her voice called from inside, coming nearer. 'Perhaps you'd prefer a cup of tea? I was going to make one for myself.' And then she was standing in the open doorway, beckoning with a thin brown hand. 'You could sit down and rest for a while. While I make the tea. It must be hell walking around all day in this heat.'

Disbelievingly Jonas walked through the open door. Obediently he sat where she motioned, placing his clumsy shoes lightly on the plush carpet. He sat on the very edge of the soft armchair while she went to make the tea. Dimly he heard the clatter of cups, the shrill whistle of a kettle, her voice humming softly. He sat deep in thought, his body rigidly calm, his mind racing through the events of the day. Weaving the loose threads into a whole. The woman on the train, Dora's open deceit, the city man's shameless words, and now this white woman who offered him her home, herself?, as though she had been waiting for his knock on the door. A day of shadows and forebodings. This was no chain of events without a link. He was no fool! As a man of God he prided himself on being well-versed in the ways of evil. Ai, but he had been blind, not to see the devil's work in her welcoming smile, her beckoning hand!

A conviction formed in Jonas as solid as the leaden weight in his belly. As palpable as the sweat that trickled down his collar and into the small of his back.

The woman returned carrying a tray, neatly laid out. The cups were of a delicately patterned china with matching saucers. There was even a plate of biscuits. Jonas wondered at her cunning. *Ai*, but she had overplayed her hand, he thought with satisfaction. The delicate china was a false note. There were no chips on the cup she handed him, the handle was intact, the delicate saucer dwarfed by his sweating hands. And then she took a cup of the same fine stuff from the tray and sipped slowly at the hot tea. This extravagance of equality was transparent to Jonas. He eyed the door but it was closed. He would have to match her cunning. She was talking now, a thoughtful frown playing between her blue eyes. 'Perhaps you find this strange,' she said hesitantly, 'coming from a white woman, but I don't agree with this rotten system.' Jonas nodded his head in agreement. He said nothing. To say nothing, he knew, was best. He gulped a mouthful of hot tea and watched her warily. She looked puzzled and then quite suddenly, as though resolved, stood up. Taken by surprise, Jonas watched her advance across the stretch of carpet towards him. Soundlessly, he thought, as one scarcely human. She smiled, 'I'm sorry, I haven't even introduced myself,' she said and stretched her thin hand towards him. His own hand, as though possessed of a will of its own, reached out to meet hers. They were almost touching when Jonas came to his senses. A strangled wail came from his mouth as though he had tasted hell-fire itself. He jumped from the armchair, flinging the cup and saucer towards her. The woman gasped in pain as the hot tea splattered on her clothes, but Jonas didn't hear. He ran towards the door, grabbing the plastic carrier bag with one hand, wrenching at the doorhandle with the other. It flew open, the hinges cracking with the force of his escape.

Dora, who was pushing the pram past No. 62, watched in amazement as Jonas ran, jacket flying behind him, down the road. She laughed. 'Ai, Jonas,' she called, 'you got the devil at your heels, man?'