

1.  
Charlotte

The girl was thirsty.

To let them know that she was thirsty she blew the horn once. Twice, when she was hungry, although for food they only permitted her to hoot once a day. When she needed the bathroom, or when she felt bored or lonely – no hooting! Those were the rules.

Every time she honked, they yelled at her, or threatened or mocked her. She honked anyway.

The horn was her lifeline. She used it to reassure herself that the men were still there.

The men didn't get it.

She did.

While she waited, Charlotte's dread grew. She strained her ears for the familiar clip-clop approaching the door, for the sound of someone unbolting it. Please send in 'the good one' she implored the door. Please let it be Picasso.

The 'big one' trudged in. She called the 'good one' Picasso and the 'big one' 'Nobody'. That's because the big one had answered 'Nobody' when she asked him who he was. The other one, the good one, she called Picasso, because he'd once sketched her profile. She'd asked him to leave her his sketchpad and pencil for something to do during her captivity, but he'd just laughed at her.

The pseudonyms she'd given the men appeared to amuse them. If they minded them, they never showed it.

"Thirsty? Again? What's wrong with you?" 'Nobody' zigzagged towards her. A bottle of cheap liquor dangled from his right hand. The bottle, its neck clutched between his index and middle fingers, swung to and fro in rhythm with his staggering strides. The girl feared the bottle would slip through his fingers and burst into pieces - followed by an angry outburst.

'Nobody' flew into a rage often. At first, she used to wonder about what she'd said or done wrong to anger him. Over time, she learned to ignore him. Avoiding conflicts with them was even more important than getting them to look in on her. She was sorry, that she'd hooted.

'Nobody' pressed the bottle against the girl's lips; the hard rim forced her mouth open. The glass clanked against her teeth. "Drink!"

She managed to push the bottle away. "I need water, not liquor."

"Make up your mind! Are you thirsty or not?"

"No."

"Why did you blow the horn then? Do you think I've got nothing better to do?"

His bloodshot eyes stared her into submission.

"Nice, innit?" He nodded and took another swig. "Ah, good stuff!" His wide grin bared his yellow-stained teeth as he snarled: "Come on, lass, have some more!"

She turned away.

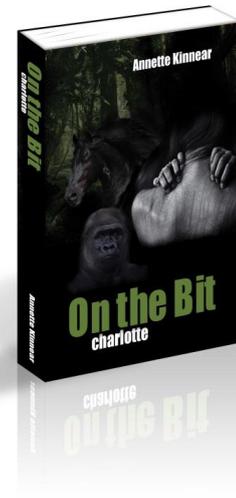
'Nobody' forced the 40% alcohol down the girl's throat. It burned and made her choke.

"Stupid cow!" he growled and left.

Charlotte recited the nine commandments she'd invented. Like every day, she added a new one:

1. Don't provoke them into angry outbursts
2. Keep calm if they happen anyway.
3. Check several times a day that they're still here.
4. Think no further than getting through the day.
5. Talk aloud to yourself when no one is around.
6. Eat what they put in front of you to remain strong.
7. Drink as often as they let you, even if you're not thirsty.
8. Don't cry in front of them.
9. Don't feel ashamed when they take you to the bathroom.
10. Never honk unless it's necessary.

Day 10 drew to a close - a relatively good day - in hell.



2.

Catherine

The notorious apartheid criminal Willem van der Sosen was doing time in a medium security prison. The conditions there were amenable, the rules relaxed, compared to the maximum-security penitentiary that they'd moved him from, after years of 'good conduct'.

"Don't miss the boom," Trevor had warned Catherine several times. "You can hardly see it."

There it was – the boom. Next to it, shrouded by bushes and trees, hid a small guardhouse. There, Catherine filled in a form while a wiry bantam-sized security guard inspected her papers. Then he turned his head, and bellowed a torrent of Setswana words at the guardhouse behind him. Like wasps out of their hive, officers swarmed from the hut and laid into Catherine's car. One man searched her trunk; another one stuck a mirror under her car. A female officer scanned her license disc number into a hand-held device. Another officer noted down her car registration number, and yet another one heaved his rotund physique into the rear of her car - inspecting what? Catherine, perplexed, did not know.

She followed the signs to 'Unit 4'. Further checkpoints followed. The guards there waved her through open booms. To her right she passed a micro-village, to her left lay a sandy soccer field with remnants of goal posts, which clearly hadn't seen a net in years. Unit 4 turned out to be an elongated unspectacular compound of one-story buildings. Double-rolled NATO wire fencing served to keep unwanted visitors out, and inmates in. She entered the prison yard through an unassuming door, which was just wide enough for people to pass through it in single file. From there she made her way to a modest office building. A female officer frisked Catherine, yawning and sighing as she did so. The warden pointed to a revolving door and, yawning again, motioned Catherine to use it. On the right side of the door hung - from dangling wires - a fingerprint console. On the left, a mounted eyelevel camera stared at the new arrival. Catherine stared back, then turned to the warden, her eyes pleading for instructions.

"The electronic lock, *she's brrrooken*," the officer explained in an endearing local version of English, which has its own way with pronouns. "Just *prrrroocceed!*" The woman retreated into her office and reappeared on the other side of the revolving door. Catherine threw too much weight against the rotation mechanism, and tumbled out the other side. The door, too, seemed faulty, because it turned easily and didn't snap back into locking position. "*Wozza*," she invited Catherine to follow her in Zulu. The overweight officer wore an ill-fitting brown uniform and heavy security boots fit for an underground mine worker. She nibbled on some potato chips as she led Catherine across the prison grounds. Another officer, higher ranking, as Catherine could tell from the more elegant attire, rushed up to her with a wide sweep of her arms. She nodded her dismissal to her corpulent colleague.

"Good morning, Ms Zitgow. We've been expecting you. Would you like to take a tour of the grounds?" Her huge brown eyes were as warm as her voice.

Confusion crinkled Catherine's eyes.

"I see, you'd prefer me to take you straight to Dr Van der Sosen," the woman concluded, and gave Catherine a generous smile.

Catherine nodded her affirmation. After about thirty yards, they passed a visitors' center. "Shouldn't we go to the visitors' center over there?" Catherine asked bashfully.

"No, your appointment is right inside the jail," was the reply.

"There doesn't seem to be a lot of security once you're inside the grounds."

"You're right. It's scandalous! We have a high-tech security system, but the Justice Department hasn't paid our IT supplier for over four months now. So three weeks ago, they switched us off. Just like that." She turned her palms up and pulled her lips to one side.

"Oh," Catherine answered in surprise.

The woman shrugged once more. "No money! Are you from the press?"

"No, I'm here to visit someone."

"I just wondered about your special permit. They usually issue these only to journalists, politicians, and NGOs. Are you here about a donation?"

"Kind of," answered Catherine. She frowned as she recalled the bribe Trevor had to fork out for that 'special permission'. To their surprise, it turned out less complicated than they'd anticipated. Trevor, her friend and attorney, had greased the palm of a corrupt social worker, and now she was here.

"Is this your first visit to Sin City?" The officer made ironic reference to the famous South African casino complex 'Sun City'.

"Yes."

"Here we are," the woman chirped like a nurse rolling a new patient into her ward. She banged an old-

fashioned metallic doorknocker against a heavy cast iron door, and pushed Catherine's permit through a hatch. Someone opened the door from the inside. "See you later. I'll come back for you when you're done here." When she saw a flicker of concern hush across Catherine's face, she reassured her, "I don't have permission to accompany you past this point. My colleague will assist you from here, but no worries. You'll be quite safe!" She gave her a subtle wink.

"How much time do I have?"

"As much as you need."

"Oh, thanks," Catherine said in disbelief. She didn't expect jail visits to be this informal.

As soon as she'd stepped through the door, someone shoved a register into her hands. It was clamped to a wooden board. From it dangled a pen attached to an unsavory piece of string, which was busy unravelling itself from the wear and tear. Catherine noted that the preceding entries on the list were from religious organizations, legal professionals, or justice workers. She caught a glimpse of another of Dr van der Sosen's visitors. He'd called the previous day. Catherine read, 'Jack Jackson'. As the reason for his visit, he'd entered 'interview for a book project'. Catherine smiled believing this name to be an author's pen name. As her own reason for the visit, she stated 'counseling', just as Trevor had briefed her. After the first syllable (coun) the pen packed up. The guard gave her his. It was even shabbier, broken at the top, and hardly usable. With every letter she wrote, the tip bent upwards and reduced the rest of the word to illegible scribble.

She walked through several narrow corridors, keeping her breath shallow to lessen the overpowering odor of steamed fish. The catering equipment produced tinny rattling noises. It drew her attention to the time: 11.20.

Van der Sosen oozed charm. Like an attentive host, he offered Catherine a seat on a terrace adjacent to a function room.

A bored prison officer slouched in a chair at the other end of the terrace, well out of earshot.

"I'd offer you a drink, but as you can see, I have limited means," he said in the tone of a benign grandfather.

"Thanks, I'm not thirsty," Catherine declined, as if the gesture was indeed intended to quench her thirst. Van der Sosen's hospitable affectations began to bother her.

"No, come on, we must have something to drink!" he decreed in a sudden resolve. He called the jailor and after exchanging a few words in Afrikaans with him, the warden scuffled off.

His absence made Catherine feel even creepier. Here she was, inside a poorly secured prison, sitting side by side with a criminal! With not one guard in sight! "Tell me, is it normal for visits not to be supervised or timed?" she asked.

"It's not normal," replied Van der Sosen in a tone that shrouded his words in a cloak of mystery. He seemed to be hinting at 'VIP-status' – conceited yes, but not entirely without charm.

Catherine was a seasoned recruiter and experienced at guessing a person's age but in his case, although she knew that this man was seventy-eight years old, she would have guessed him at no older than sixty-five.

Another inmate, dressed in tatty shoes and a torn orange overall, shuffled past and disappeared behind a semi-finished stage-setup at the other end of the function room. An industrial power drill roared up. With the reflexes of a cat, the agile old man jumped from his seat. "Can't this wait, Bongani? I'm entertaining!"

His words reverberated in Catherine's mind: I'm entertaining.

*He's en-ter-tai-ning?*

"Bongaaaaani! Please."

One hundred-and-thirty decibels of drilling racket prevented Bongani from making a reply.

Van der Sosen turned to Catherine. "I do apologize. We'll be staging a musical this weekend. Does the noise bother you?"

Catherine shook her head although it bugged her immensely. It wasn't just the piercing noise; the thought of an electric drill in the hands of a convicted criminal behind a paper-thin stage wall horrified her. In her mind's eye, she saw merciless convicts grab her, pointing drills at her throat, turning her into the instrument of escape for hundreds of fellow inmates.

Van der Sosen sensed her unease. "Don't worry; they only assign this kind of work to trustworthy inmates."

The warden returned with two glasses filled with an artificial orange drink, overloaded with E-Numbers. Like a waiter, he placed the dubious refreshment in front of 'his patrons' and slumped back into his chair.

Van der Sosen lifted his glass and gave her a cheery smile. “*Prost!* As your father would have said. Right Catherine?”

His warm demeanor told her that she’d endeared herself to him. Catherine felt embarrassed by this, but she dug into her reservoir of charm, hoping to unearth some. She needed his cooperation!

“Yes, *Prost!*” Wary of the glass and its contents, she took a tentative sip of the extremely sugary drink.

*I’m selling my soul here, gosh!*

“Orange juice?”

“Jail version of it.”

“What’s the play about?” She hastily put down the sickly sweet beverage.

“It’s about a sixty-seven year old grandmother from rural Kwa-Zulu Natal. She is raising her five grandchildren after two of her daughters died from HIV Aids.”

“That’s not unusual in our country. What’s special about this play?”

“Her criminal son supports his mother and sends her money every month to help care for the orphans. One day, the police arrest him and so she’s left with only her meagre relief checks. One day she puts the children in her sister’s care and, despite her age, travels to Johannesburg to look for work. On her way, police stop the bus for a routine inspection. She recognizes one of the cops. He is her nephew. When she... Tell you what, why don’t you come on Saturday and find out what happens next? Our male choir is one of the best in the country.”

“Which role do you play in the musical?”

“A rural doctor. Don’t worry, I won’t sing.”

Catherine left his invitation unanswered. “Thanks for seeing me.”

“Will you attend?” Van der Sosen persisted. “Every inmate may invite one guest, every actor is permitted two. I still have one ticket left.” He grinned.

“That’s kind of you, but I won’t come. But thanks for meeting me today.”

“Please call me Willem, Catherine. Your father and I knew each other well. My condolences, I know he passed away a few years ago. A heart attack, wasn’t it?”

Catherine was flabbergasted.

*He makes it sound like we are friends, almost family. Who is this man? Is he insane?*

She forgot to answer.

“It was a heart attack, was it not?”

“Sorry, yes.”

“I try to keep up with what’s going on outside. It’s not easy, but it’s important for me to keep track of my friends.”

Catherine cleared her throat. “Dr Van Sosen, may I get to the point of my being here?”

Catherine couldn’t bring herself to call him by his first name. She noticed it and mustered all her strength to come across more warmly from now on. She needed this man to help her avert a horrific terrorist attack. The group ‘Western Initiative Countering Eastern Domination’ (WICED) aimed to launch a devastating attack on the world’s Islamic community. Although the organization had threatened her life if she didn’t comply, she felt guilty about her past involvement with the group. She was prepared to do almost anything to stop them.

Van der Sosen replied, “Of course you may. I’m curious to find out why you’re here, Catherine.”

“I mean no holds barred. Is that okay?”

Van der Sosen’s eyes scanned Catherine’s face.

She didn’t wait for his reply. “You were my father’s client, right?”

“At your father’s request we never made our relationship public, but I suppose it’s all right if I tell you, seeing you’re his daughter, that yes, on a few occasions, we did some business together.”

“After my dad died, I took over from him. That’s how I know that you worked on ‘special projects’ together.” Catherine was hoping to lure Van der Sosen into a trap. She had no evidence, just a hunch.

“Special projects? Didn’t we want to avoid beating about the bush?”

“Sorry, you’re right.”

“Catherine, I’ll make this easy for you if you tell me frankly why you’re here. How may I help you?”

“Fact is, Willem,” she nearly choked on his first name (and on her lie), “I have a candidate. A biological terror expert. High caliber. I don’t know where to start.”

“Tell me more.”

Catherine reeled off a fictitious profile of a seedy chemical warfare expert, resembling the track record of Dr Bernhard Ruckebier. She had recruited him for WICED to help them execute their plan. Now she pretended to want to place such a person to get connected with this behind WICED. Once

exposed, she reckoned, they would have no choice but to abandon their plans. A simple but dangerous plan. Catherine couldn't just sit back while WICED carried out their mission to contaminate the Arabic world with VEE - Venecuelan Equine Encaphilitis, a virus, which was deadly to humans and equines. VEE was Bernhard Ruckebier's field of expertise.

"You want to get him a job?"

"Yes, Willem, whom do you know?"

"Can I trust you?"

"Whom can I call, Willem?" Catherine met him head-on. She had experience.

So did Van der Sensen. "You're avoiding my question. So, I can't? Trust you, I mean?"

Catherine held the space by maintaining a long silence and piercing eye contact. On the outside, she seemed unflustered. On the inside, she was crumbling.

*Hang in there. Be quiet.*

"Oh well. Why not? I like you."

*Bingo!*

"If I do this for you, Catherine, will you return the favor?"

"What could I possibly do for you in return, Willem?"

"Come to our play."

*That's all?*

"No, I won't do that, Willem. If I agreed without intending to show up, I'd be lying. Don't compel me into letting you down, please."

Catherine willfully opted out of making an excuse. She knew that confident men like Van der Sensen valued strong opponents. Unshaken by this jail setting, he appeared untroubled by playing the bizarre role of a host 'entertaining' a guest. He'd react positively to a brazen provocation. He was that type. Like Rivas. Like her father. And some of her top caliber clients and candidates.

"People's Republic of China. 1999. Chilanchi."

"What's that?"

"Do your homework."

"I've never heard the term. Is that a person? A place? Something to eat? Where should I start?"

"Start by coming to our musical."

"Willem, you can't be serious. You've just tipped me off on a potential multi-million dollar deal. In return, you ask me to attend a prison play? Why is it so important to you?"

"Are you coming or not?"

"No."

Van der Sensen swept the dome of his bent index finger over his smiling mouth.

"Willem, I'd like to ask you another favor. I would like to meet Bishop Tutu. You know him, right? Please arrange a meeting with him for me."

Catherine was pursuing a two-fold strategy, the first was to avert WICED's efforts, and the second was to ask a peace broker such as Archbishop emeritus Desmond Tutu for help in her struggle.

Van der Sensen chilled. "Catherine, I've heard enough. I don't need to hear any more of this nonsense. I can't help you here. You overestimate me. Before my conviction, Bishop Tutu, in his role as Chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, tried hard to mediate in my case. Since I rejected the conditions of his offer of amnesty, he dropped my case. His interest in me lapsed, mine in him never existed. We're no longer in contact and there never was any common ground between us."

"He will see you, Willem, and then you could introduce me." When Van der Sensen made no reply, Catherine reinforced her plea by appealing to Van der Sensen's apparent loyalty to her late father: "This request is linked to my father's activities as well."

"I'm sorry, Catherine, but this pointless conversation is over! Whatever possessed you to come here? Catherine, if I wanted to make peace with the enemies of my past, I wouldn't need your intervention. I knew what I was doing when I turned down amnesty. I've always believed that racial segregation is the best solution for my country – then and now. I owe no one a justification. I chose to go to jail rather than betray my convictions. I will probably die here. I didn't beg for mercy then and I won't recant now! Apart from never being able to look at my cowardly face in the mirror again, it would mean nearly two decades of incarceration for nothing. In this facility, I share my cell with fourteen black inmates, often up to double that amount. Sixty-nine percent of the detainees and one-hundred percent of staff in this prison are black Africans. I would prefer solitary confinement for the rest of my life. Some would call it the irony of life, Catherine. Nothing hurts me anymore. Goodbye."

Okay fine, Catherine thought, I also didn't act against my convictions by coming to this crock's musical.

No way! Chilanchi, China, 1999 – it's a start.

“Goodbye Dr Van der Sosen, I mean Willem, I wish you all the best for your play.”

Back in her car, she called Tom, her 2 IC. He and Trevor were in this with her. Catherine had organized separate cellphones and prepaid SIM cards so nobody could tap their calls - so she thought.

“Chilanchi, China, 1999,” she said.

“What about it? Is this a tip-off from Van der Sosen?” Tom asked.

Catherine filled him in.

“Great! And we paid a bribe for that?”

“Now hold on just a minute! How much would you have coaxed out of him, huh? All right, the Tutu story backfired, but come on, give me some credit here. Get on the internet. As you know, I'll be away for a couple of weeks, so you have some time. When I come back I'll tackle my dad's database again. There were two clues left that I couldn't unravel... who knows?”

It was this ill-fated database of criminal scientists, which had triggered her kidnapping ordeal earlier in the year.

“Okay, but give me more to go on! Chilanchi - is that a name?”

“How would I know? A criminal, a conspiracy, a political party. You're the researcher. You'll find out. Right, I'm off then. Don't forget to have my car picked up from the airport tomorrow.”

“Hold on, Cat, I just thought of something. Maybe Van der Sosen was giving you a clue by inviting you to his theatre play?”

“Mm, good point. I didn't think of that, but I can't go anyway Tom. I can't postpone my trip to Scotland again. I didn't think we'd get the appointment with him so soon. It messed up my plans as it is. You'll just have to solve this mystery on your own. Oh, and stop calling me Cat! Where does that come from all of a sudden?”

“I'll tell you some time. Enjoy your flight. If things don't go your way, I mean if you need us, we're always here for you. You know that, don't you?”

“Thanks, Tom, see you soon. Oh, before I forget, I'll meet with Alex tonight. If everything goes well I'll offer him his job back and ask him to start on Monday. I want him onboard ASAP.”

“What?”

Tom couldn't stand Alex, their former IT specialist. Alex had betrayed Catherine by letting WICED into her father's secret database. Catherine seemed bent on making amends – for reasons that were beyond Tom's comprehension.

“Be nice to him, Tom, okay? I don't want him to feel victimized. If we employ him again, we'll have to forget what happened. He made a mistake, that's all. Please, Tom, it's important to me.”

“Do you always have to get your own way? I get your need for reconciliation. But what about what the business needs? This guy is bad news. Keep away from him.”

“You think he'll harm us again?”

“I don't think he'll cause trouble any time soon, it's a matter of principle for me.”

“Exactly! It's also a matter of principle for me. Is that all?”

“I reckon he's lost interest in Firm Commitments in any case.”

“Then why would he have agreed to see me?”

“Who knows? By the way what's happening about that Spanish horse you wanted to buy?”

“Van der Sosen came first. You know he's the reason I had to postpone my trip to Andalucía.”

“Yeah, so when are you going?”

“As soon as possible,” she evaded him.

“Can I get the ball rolling for you while you're away?”

Catherine exhaled deeply. “No, that's something I have to take care of myself, Tom, but that's sweet of you. See you in three weeks' time. You only call me if it's unavoidable, okay?”

“Don't worry about a thing. I've got this.”