They said you are dead.

2 a.m. I am almost back on the local Israeli schedule after more than a week of harsh jetlag symptoms. The phone rings. Incessantly. Who can it be?

Lebbo is not saying hello. It’s not like her. She usually keeps this long ritual of greeting that asks if I have slept well. Or rather, "How did you rise?" *O tsugile* jwang? In Setswana. This time, in response to my sleepy “hello," I heard her laugh loudly. "You are alive, my sister. You are alive! "she is yelling this phrase in English.

What is she talking about? I am still half asleep.

"Am I alive?" I mumble. "I believe I am. Oh. Lebbo, it is 2 am here…"

“Sorry sister, sorry," …she exclaims, rolling her Rs, trying to contain the bursts of laughter. “I am so sorry. So sorry.” Then she shifts into rapid Setswana, which I have difficulty following. “Kelerwele tells everyone in the village “*Pnina o sule”* that you are dead. I was so sad,” she says. “This morning, the old lady I take care of passed away. I could not take two deaths in one day.” She continues.

“But you are not dead! I am so happy, sister.”

She says a lot more in Setswana. But I get only the drift of her story as I try to get the basic vital facts.

“That I am dead? Who says that?” I barely manage to insert my questions into her breathless report.

“Yes. Yes. You know. The son of Kay [her older sister who has been staying with her in the US since mid-December 2022] called us here in America this evening, and he wondered if you are still here with us in America. We told him you spent some time with us but left last week to visit your people in Israel. He told us that Kelerwele is spreading the word that you Pnina *o sule*-- are dead.”

“Wait. Wait. Who is Kelerwele?”

"You know her, Pnina. She is the wife of Mosis.”

“Aaa, the widow? Sure. You are right. I just remembered. Ya. Mosis wife.”

“Why would she spread such an idea? “

I am thinking “fake news," but I am still not fully grasping this middle-of-the-night story. After a short lull in our exchange, I reflect:

“You know, Lebbo, this is surprising. I did not know people in Mokokwana still speak about me. Do they still remember me?”

"What do you think, sister? Is this a good or a bad thing?”

“Well, sister. This is not good. To say that someone is dead…” As she spoke, I noticed her measured tone and thoughtful manner. She effortlessly slips into the familiar "explaining mode," providing context and information.

Over three or four decades, we have exchanged numerous correspondences, and my once “little sister” has grown accustomed to my habit of seeking additional context and clarification. She responds to my request immediately, without any hesitation.

"What's your interpretation? Is it positive or negative?" I ask. She calmly provides her insight. I quickly grab the pen and notepad conveniently placed beside my bed. I meticulously record Lebbo's exact words as she speaks deliberately. “Well, clearly, this is *lefufe*. You do remember what is *lefufe,* my sister, do you?”

Once I admit my lack of familiarity with the term, she clarifies, "Here in America, they call this jealousy. Kelerwele is envious of my mother and me. She believes that you were the one who arranged my journey to America."

"Oh, I see. She is resentful and angry because she believes I assisted you instead of her?"

I have provided different kinds of assistance to several individuals in the village. Although Kelerwele had received a few gifts from me, Lebbo had recently emerged as my primary liaison. During my 2017 trip, she assisted me in my research, and I rewarded her for her efforts.

After a long moment of silence, I asked her to explain.

“Why do they think I can arrange papers for you in America? Don't they know I am Israeli, not American?”

I tried to keep my voice steady as Lebbo chuckled, but her laughter couldn't hide her bitterness.

"She is a moloi, sister. That's what she is”.

“A Moloi?” I almost screamed the word.

The term "moloi" was not unfamiliar to me - in fact, I had read extensively about the phenomenon of witchcraft (boloi) in Africa before I arrived in Botswana. According to British functionalist anthropologists, it was often used as a tool of exclusion, with weaker community members becoming victims of those in power who used *boloi*.

When I crafted my PhD research proposal for Botswana, I intentionally avoided studying African life's supernatural or "exotic" aspects. I focused on exploring the more mundane yet crucial processes that revolved around the shifting patterns of land control, the advent of democratically elected village-level committees, and the emergence of new communities in previously agricultural zones. I was determined to steer clear of a colonialist research perspective and instead approach my study with a fresh, unbiased lens.

"I feel a sense of unease," I confided to Lebbo, using the Tswana phrase "Kea tshaba" to connote fear. Lebbo chuckled again in response. "You have nothing to fear, my sister. You are strong, and this “boloi” will not touch you."

As we spoke, memories from over 40 years ago flooded me. I suddenly relived a harrowing encounter with Joshua and his group of menacing young men. This incident almost destroyed my fledgling research in 1982, and the vivid recollections of it now left me feeling uneasy and apprehensive. Joshua was a middle-aged man who walked around the village with a coterie of young men under the influence of substances and alcohol. They didn't drink the locally brewed bojalwa beer brewed and sold by local women but indulged in chibuku commercial beer at the local bar. Their intimidating demeanor caused people to steer clear of them. ”I will buy you a beer *lekgoa* [white woman]," he proposed one early evening when I was trying to find my way in his village, a lost young researcher. The "bar" was a dingy, isolated cement structure that, along with the local butcher shop and small grocery store offering a limited selection of products such as sugar, tea, and canned goods, comprised the commercial core of this village of one thousand residents located in central Botswana.

During the early days of my attempts to begin my ethnography in this village, I found solace in the company of two Tswana women who, like me, were outsiders. One served as a Local Family Welfare Educator, and the other was a schoolteacher. They were bored and missed their homes in distant villages outside this hills’ region. They spoke some English, and we could converse. But they could not help me with my attempt to enter village life. And yet, no other villager talked to me during this time, making their friendship invaluable. They hung around the bar, frolicking with the local young men who drank chibuku beer. They taught me drinking songs. But whenever Joshua walked into the bar, they tried to get away. They warned me that Joshua was a *moloi.* They said he kills people. They told the story of a mentally challenged young man who was known to roam the agricultural zone, away from the village. They said Joshua had run over this man with his pick-up car and used his organs for his boloi. They whispered this story, warning me not to share it with others.

“Do you people [they meant non-Tswana] believe in witchcraft?” they asked me.

I said that I did not know about witchcraft but that I felt that Joshua was dangerous, and I admitted that I feared him. I met Joshua at the Village Development Committee, a newly established group promoting state-funded projects. Joshua was the chair of the committee and dominated the other members. He intimidated me, and he made me fear for my safety. He always referred to me as Lekgoa, a term for a white woman, instead of using my name. Whenever we crossed paths on the village trails, his unwarranted stares made me feel uncomfortable and anxious.

After spending a few unproductive weeks in this village, I realized that my research project needed to progress more. So, I started looking for another site for my project. One day, a Swedish man arrived to inspect the newly dug wells in the region by an international aid firm he worked for and mentioned that he was heading to a neighboring village called Mokokwana. I saw this as an opportunity to leave Joshua's village and relocate to a place where I had met some charming people the year before. After making this decision, I deliberately forgot about the man and his beliefs in the mystical elements of life that I was studying. As time passed, I convinced myself that avoiding fixation on these elements would allow me to focus on my primary research. Reflecting on my field experiences, I considered other instances where boloi-witchcraft appeared.

I recall visiting Moses, my research assistant and dear friend, in the hospital in 1993. His legs were paralyzed. The doctors did not know what caused this. I went to talk to them. They shook their heads. Moses giggled his good-natured giggle and declared simply that he was bewitched.

“It is jealousy,” *Moses* said and announced that he was going to visit a “strong *ngaka* [healing doctor]“ in far-away Zimbabwe who might undo the spell that made him sick. Less than a year later, Moses died. It was at the height of the AIDS epidemic. People died at an unprecedented rate. And they refused to say the word AIDS. It was taboo.

It was rather interesting that Moses had used the same word Lebbo mentioned to describe what caused his wife’s rage against Lebbo and me --*Lefife*, jealousy, they said.

“She is a *moloi*," Lebbo repeated the word emphatically.

“Should I be scared now if I wish to return to the village for another visit?” I asked Lebbo.

Lebbo was fast to dispel my fear.

“Oh, they can do nothing to you**,**” she said soothingly. “In fact,” she added, “if a person who is said to be dead turns out to be alive, it means that person beats the power of the *moloi*, and she—that is you—is the “strong” one. *O mo thata,* she shifted into Setswana giggling at me.

How do you spell 'thata'? I checked with her because I wanted it spelled correctly in my notes.

“Yes. There is an h after the first t. No h after the second t,” she instructed patiently.