The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.

vladimir nabokov, *Speak, Memory*
PART ONE

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The story that you have asked me to tell you does not begin with the pitiful ugliness of Lloyd’s death. It begins on a long-ago day in August when the sun seared my blistered face and I was nine years old and my father and mother sold me to a strange man.

I say my father and mother, but it was really my mother. I see them now as I saw them on the day we first met Lloyd. They are in the clothes that they wore to church on Sundays and when we went to town for window-shopping, because if you are going to hand your daughter over to a perfect stranger, you need to look your best.

My mother wears a white dress with big red poppies all over it. Around her waist is a cloth belt in the same material, and on her head a red hat with a white plastic flower on it. Her shoes and bag are white. My father is in a safari suit whose colour I can no longer remember. Or perhaps it wasn’t a safari suit at all that he wore, and I have only put him in one because it is what all the men wore in those days. His hair shines with Brylcreem.

It was a happy day for me. I wore my favourite dress, a white lacy dress with a purple sash, my Christmas dress from the year before. I was in town, far from the torments of my school-playground nemesis, Nhau, who tormented me as much at home as at school because he lived on our street. I was in town with my father, who held my hand as we walked. I was happiest about
this, that I had him to myself, with one sister at school and the other recently dead.

To crown my joy, a white woman in the chocolate section of the department store came up to us as we moved towards the lifts. She wore glasses with frames that elongated upwards into points on each side of her face, giving her eyes a distorted look, as though I were seeing them through the milk bottles, the gold- and silver-topped ones, that we bought at the shops. ‘She looks like an angel; isn’t she an angel?’ she said. She gave me a dollar coin. It felt large and unfamiliar in my hand.

That brings with it another, earlier memory, of the twenty-five-cent coin that a nurse gave me when I cried hard after an injection at Gomo, the government hospital for the poor. I had bought sweets, which Nhau persuaded me to plant in the street outside his house. They would grow into a large sweet tree, he said.

From the chocolate section on the ground floor, we walked to the lift. A man in a maroon uniform with a large scar running down his face announced each floor as we reached it. ‘Third floor: children’s toys, children’s clothes and tearoom,’ he said as we left the lift.

My parents and I sat on one side of a booth. A bee hovered over my glass of Cherry Plum before toppling into the fizzy purple drink. It tried to fly out but its wings were wet and heavy and it floundered in the bubbles. And there was ice cream to go with the Cherry Plum, an elaborate sundae that Lloyd bought for me – Lloyd was on the other side of the booth – complete with a whole banana and sprinkled with hundreds and thousands.

I remember, too, the first words that Lloyd said to me. ‘Speak, Mnemosyne,’ he said.

I had no way of knowing then that Lloyd was teasing me, or
that Mnemosyne was another word for my name, Memory. But perhaps I am confusing this with the second day that I saw him, the day he walked me to his car and into my new life.

I could also start by telling you all about Lloyd. I could start by telling you that I did not kill him. ‘Murder,’ said the prosecutor who laid out the case against me at the High Court, ‘is the unlawful and intentional killing of a human being who was alive at the time.’

After the police came for me on the night he died, after they arrested me and took me to the police station at Highlands, after I had spent three days without food or drink, after I had wept myself hoarse and my marrow dry – for Lloyd, I told myself, but really it was the fear – and after the dreams started coming again, I told them what they wanted to hear.

Their disbelief exploded in bursts of laughter. ‘Just tell us the real truth. You were his girlfriend and he was your boyfriend. He was your sugar daddy. Just tell us the truth, that you killed him for the money.’

It is strange, the inconsequential thoughts that come at a time like that. As I looked at the constable who headed my interrogation, I noticed that his jutting-out eyes gave him the staring effect of a drunken gargoyle on a public building. ‘Or maybe he made you do funny things to him in bed? This is a serious case, this one, it is no laughing matter.’

His laughter erupted thickly into the room. Two large dimples appeared in his cheeks, producing a startling transformation. The gargoyle had become a cherub.

‘And it was the money, isn’t it. They have too much, these whites,’ said his partner, a stocky woman in a faded uniform that seemed ready to burst with every movement she made. A button had already fallen from its place on her tunic.
I could not stop looking at the pink plastic rollers in her hair. Even in my distress, the orphaned thought came to me that surely, no one made plastic rollers like those any more, the spiky ones that attach themselves to your hair together with sharp plastic pokers.

‘A nice-looking young woman like you,’ she said. ‘You are not so bad-looking but for the, well, you know. You certainly know how to take care of yourself; I must give you that. But honestly, why else would you live with a white man like that, alone, just the two of you alone in that big house?’

She dug her right thumb into her left nostril as she spoke.

I repeated what I had already told them. ‘I lived with Lloyd Hendricks because my parents sold me to him as a child.’

Even as I said it, I knew that no one would believe me, and why should they, when I could hardly believe it myself, when I had struggled to understand it all my life. From the moment I saw my mother stuff the money that Lloyd had given her into her bra, from the moment after Lloyd shut the door of his car on me, I have wondered how my parents could have brought themselves to do it.

‘My parents sold me to him,’ I repeated.

Officer Rollers looked at Officer Dimples and laughed.

‘What is she talking?’ she said. With her index finger, she flicked dried mucus from her thumb. ‘We do not sell children in this country,’ she said. ‘What are you talking?’

There was a loud scrape as she pushed her chair back from the table to walk out of the room. Her voice came back to us from down the corridor. ‘Huyai mundinzwirewo zvirimo.’

At her invitation, the room swarmed with officers. As they crowded around me with their mocking laughter and loud voices, I knew that there would be no convincing them. And if they did not believe the truth of this basic fact, how could I convince them
of how he had actually died? What imaginative powers did they possess, these men and women in their brown-and-grey uniforms, this woman in her strained seams and pink rollers, this man who leered as he imagined funny things with white sugar daddies, what could make them see the horror of the moments that followed after I found Lloyd dead?

Lloyd rarely talked openly about how I came to live with him. When he spoke of it at all, it was always in euphemisms. He spoke of ‘taking me in’, of ‘giving me a home’, the good-hearted rich man taking in the poor black child, the cheerful Cheeryble giving room and board to an ungrateful Dickensian orphan. Except that it was really a case of the white man buying the black child, apart, of course, from the ‘well, you know’, as Officer Rollers called it, the condition that makes me black but not black, white but not white. That is how it was, and I will tell you all about it.