

The Suit



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CAN THEMBA

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The Suit

by Can Themba

Adapted by Chris Lan Wyk

Illustrated by Renée Koc!



Johannesburg

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Cover illustrations by Renée Koch

Photograph of Can Themba from Bailey's African Photo Archives

The Suit has been published before in *The Will to Die* (David Philip, 1982) and *The World of Can Themba* (Ravan Press, 1985)

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Some facts about the writer

Dorsay Can Themba was born in 1924. His parents had four children and they struggled to feed them and send them all to school.



But Can was a clever student, and he received a scholarship to study at Fort Hare University. After Fort Hare he taught English at the Western Native Bantu School.

In 1952 Can became a journalist after winning a short story competition in *Drum* magazine. Can published many stories during his lifetime and he became one of the many famous writers of the fifties whose writings are still popular today.

Can Themba lived in Sophiatown and he wrote about life as he saw it happening around him: violence, gangsters, poverty in the townships. The South African Government banned Can. And this meant that for many years it was against the law to read his stories. Can Themba died in 1967.

The Suit is his most famous story. It was published in a collection of his stories called *The Will to Die*. *The Suit* has also been made into a play and a comic book.

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Five-thirty in the morning. Philemon woke up and the blanket creased up when he moved under it. He did not want his wife to wake up. So he pulled himself slowly out of bed. Then he looked at his wife and admired her peaceful face as she lay sleeping.

He picked up his shoes and socks and tip-toed into the kitchen.

He smiled and yawned, and gave thanks to his gods: for life, for his beautiful wife Tilly, for the strength to work, and for the good and happy days that he had every month and every year of his life. And at the end of this good life, he thought, he would surely end up in heaven.

He pulled aside the curtain and saw that it was raining softly outside. It was the kind of rain that soaks one to the skin. The kind of rain that could go on for many days.

He wondered about this rain. Why did the rain in Sophiatown always come in the morning when workers had to come out of their homes? In the afternoons the rain stopped. Then the sun was very hot when messengers had to run all

over town. But when workers had to knock off and go home, the rain came down again.

He smiled at the strange ways of the weather. And then he shook his head as if to say, 'Ai, but the gods are strange!'

He took an old torn rain cape hanging behind the kitchen door. He put the cape over his head and ran to the toilet in the yard, nearly slipping in a muddy pool of water.



The toilet was locked. Damnit! Somebody was already inside. That is what happens when you live in a yard with twenty or thirty other people.

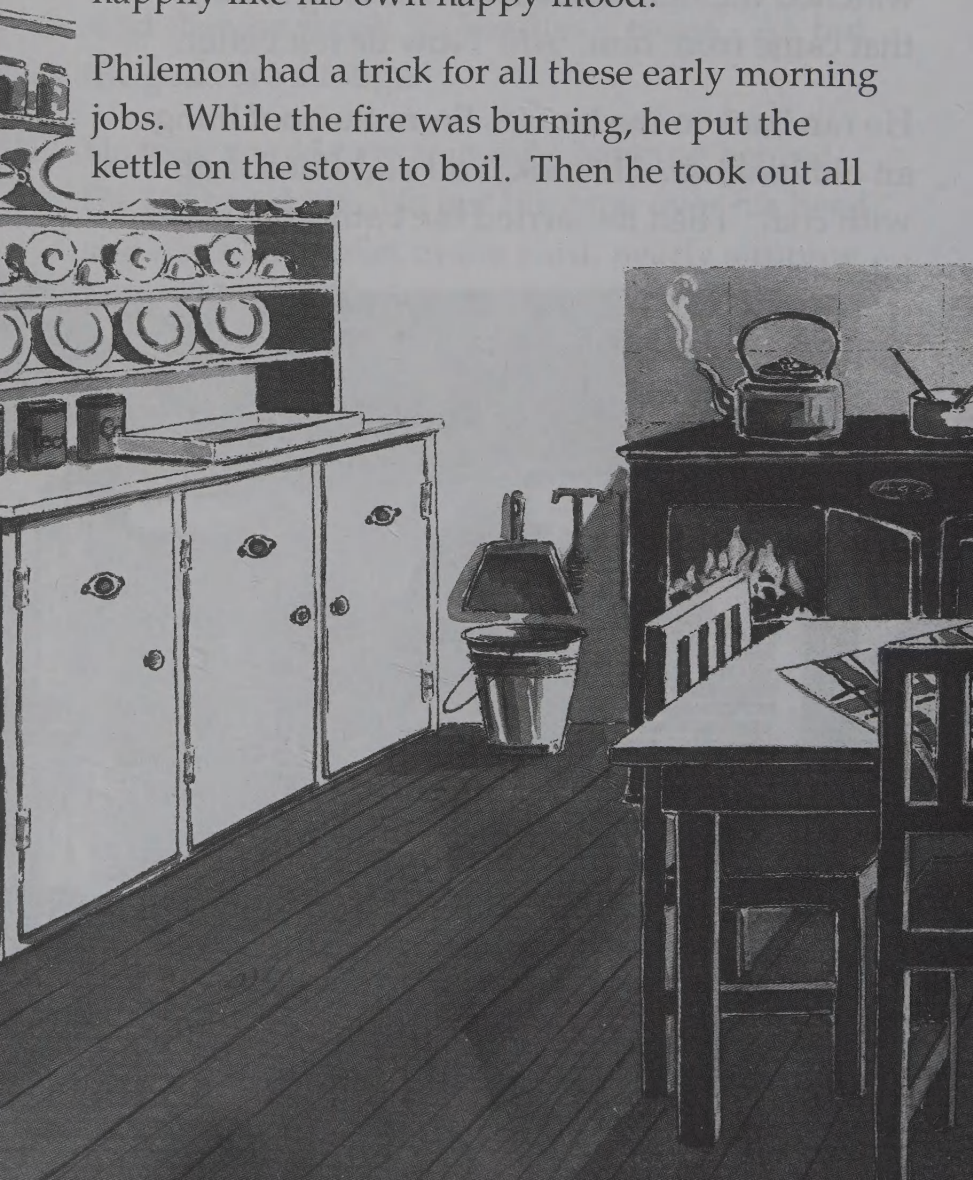
He danced around while he waited to use the toilet. Then he could hold back his need no longer. He went to the back of the toilet and watched the rain wash away the long stream that came from him. Ah! Now he felt better.

He ran back to the house. From the roof hung an old bathtub. He took it off and filled it up with coal. Then he carried the bathtub into the kitchen.



Philemon was humming one of those songs that you can't get out of your head. He lit the fire in the stove and soon the flames were jumping up happily like his own happy mood.

Philemon had a trick for all these early morning jobs. While the fire was burning, he put the kettle on the stove to boil. Then he took out all



the things he would need for the day: his case and the files that go with it; the book that he was reading; the letters of his lawyer boss which he posted before he reached the office; his and Tilly's dry-cleaning slips; his lunch made the night before by his good wife; and today the torn rain cape because of that rain outside.



The kettle on the stove was just about to boil. He took it off the stove and poured the water into a basin. He filled the kettle up again and put it back on the stove.

Then he washed himself carefully; his face, his armpits, in between the legs. White people sometimes complained about the smell of black people. But these white people did not know just how carefully Philemon washed himself. He also took great care in dressing himself. And then he was ready to make breakfast.

Oh how he liked taking a tray of warm breakfast to his wife while she lay in bed. He liked standing with the tray in his hands waiting for Tilly to open her eyes and see him, clean and well-dressed.

These are the things we black people want to do for our own people. Not for whites - but we have to do it for them!

Matilda liked getting her breakfast in bed. But she refused to let Philemon wash the dishes after breakfast.



‘Off with you,’ she would send him on his way.

At the bus-stop Philemon looked for his friend, old Maphikela. He liked riding on the same bus as Maphikela. Maphikela made jokes, told stories and made all the passengers laugh.

But this morning, Philemon was disappointed. Maphikela was in the queue, but the cheerful old man was near the front of the queue. This meant that Maphikela would not ride on the same bus as Philemon.

Maphikela saw Philemon at the back of the queue. He waved to Philemon but there was something wrong with the old man today: he looked sad.

'I'll see you at the bus-stop in town, Phil!'
Maphikela called out to Philemon.



Philemon liked the morning bus ride into town with the talkative old Maphikela who was his 'newspaper'. All the news of the township was loudly reported. And everyone on the bus talked about this news together.

There was always news about many different people and places: they said rude things about bosses and the Government; they praised Ghana and Russia; they teased America and the West and they spoke about the latest boxing title fights.

The bus ride into town was short. But the passengers learnt a lot from these news stories. And there was no danger of being arrested for saying anything that was against the law.

When Philemon got to town he looked around for Maphikela. The old man was standing underneath one of those bus-stops that don't keep out the wind or the rain or the sun.

It was easy to find Maphikela. He was, as usual, teasing some office boys in khaki-green uniforms.

Philemon and Maphikela walked together to where they worked. But Maphikela didn't talk

too much. Philemon wondered what was wrong with the old man. Maybe he wants to borrow money from me, Philemon thought.

After some time Maphikela began to speak.

'Son,' he said sadly, 'there is something I have to tell you. I don't want to. But my wife says you have to know.'

Philemon had never heard old Maphikela sound so unhappy.

'Tell me, dad,' Philemon said kindly. 'You know you can talk to me about anything.'

The old man gave a sad smile. 'We-e-e-ll,' he said, 'it's not really any of our business ... er ... but my wife felt ... you see. Damn it all! I wish these women would mind their own business.'

It was clear that old Maphikela was finding it hard to tell Philemon something. Then he decided to say it quickly.

'There's a young man who visits your wife every morning after you leave for work. It's been going on for three months now. And my wife says that you don't know about it.'

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Philemon did not scream or shout or cry. But deep inside him he felt more pain than he had ever felt before.

‘Dad,’ he said with a croaking voice, ‘I ... I have to go back home.’

He turned around and did not hear Maphikela call to him: ‘Be careful, son. Please be careful now.’

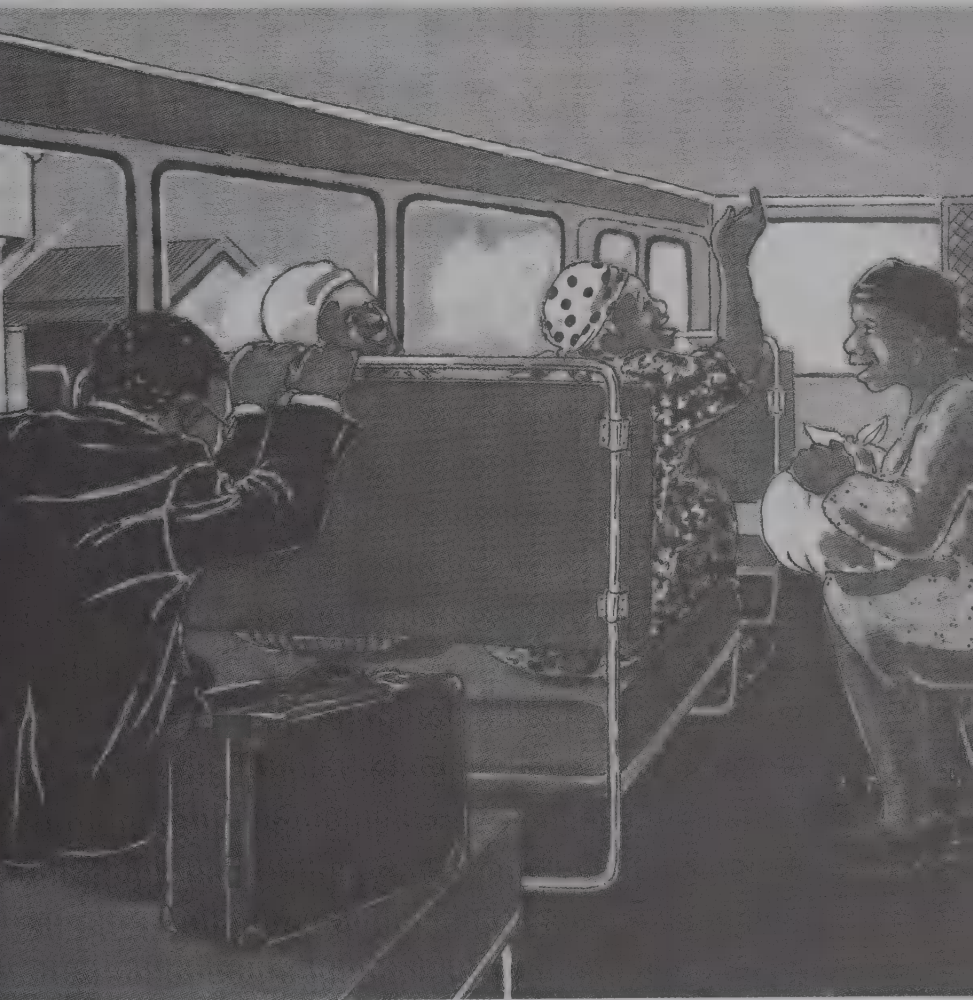
The bus ride home was painful for Philemon. His pain was so great that he found it hard to breathe. There were not so many people on the bus. But there was a group of fat washerwomen. And they seemed to be mocking him with their big bundles of dirty washing.

The bus swerved around Mayfair Circle throwing Philemon from side to side in his seat. This made him feel sick.

But the younger women on the bus liked this fast bus ride. '*Fuduga!* ... Stir the pot!' they screamed at the driver as he swung his steering wheel this way and that.

Philemon normally liked this fast driving. But today he was just not in the mood for it. He wanted to scream, run past all these women, push them out of his way and jump off the bus. He wished that this mad bus ride was over.

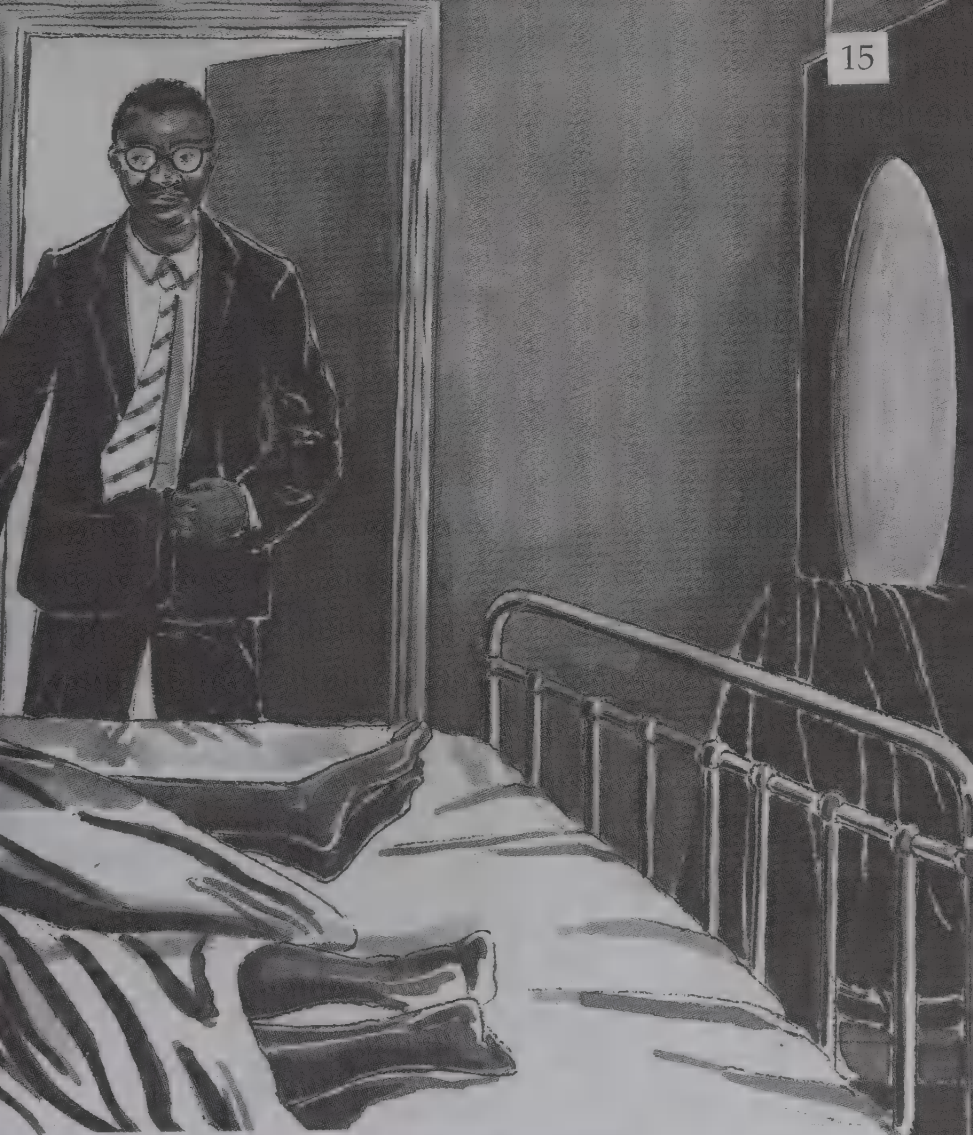
But when the bus stopped he would have to get off. He would have to go home. And he was frightened by what he would find there.



The bus reached the bus-stop in Victoria Road in Sophiatown. When he got off he tried to think straight and be calm. It wasn't easy, but Philemon tried hard. And in the end he managed to think clearly and to decide what to do.

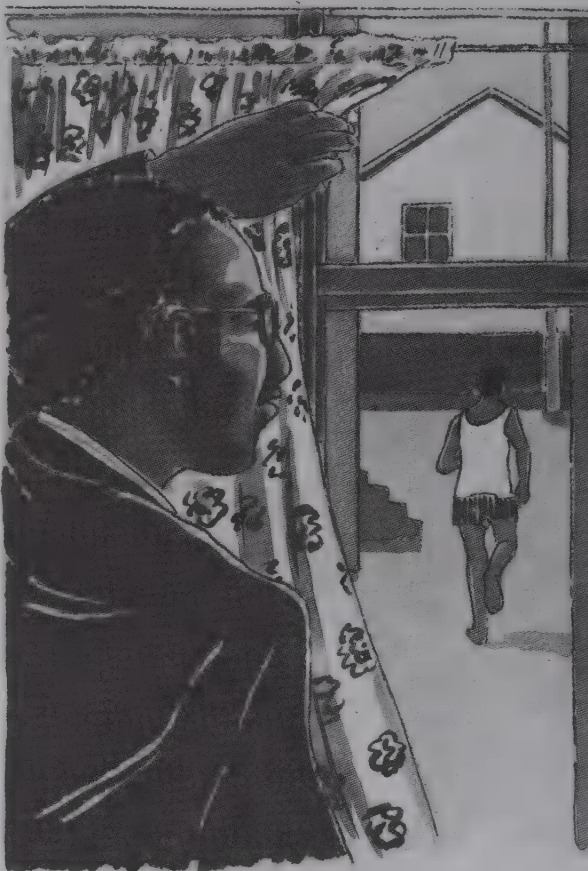
He opened the door of his house and walked quickly through the kitchen into his bedroom. And his eyes saw it all: the man lying beside his wife. The brown arm around Tilly's neck. The creased blanket. The man's suit lying across the chair. Philemon saw all this, but he pretended that he was not seeing it.





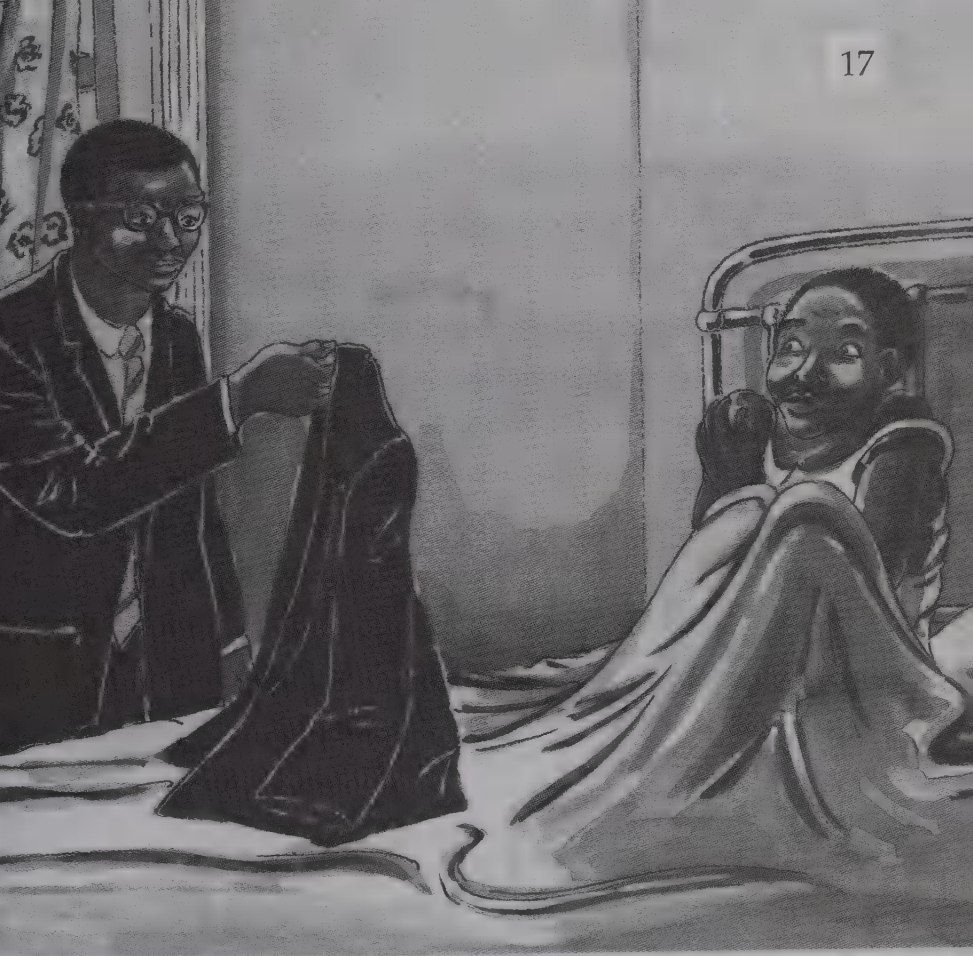
He opened the wardrobe door, speaking normally to his wife: 'Can you believe it, Tilly,' he said. 'I forgot to take my pass. I had already reached town. If it hadn't been for good old Mr Maphikela.'

At that moment there was a swooshing sound, and the bedroom window banged shut. Philemon came out from behind the wardrobe door and looked out the window. A man, dressed only in a vest and underpants, was running down the street.



Philemon turned around slowly and saw ... the suit. Slowly he picked up the suit. He looked up at Matilda and saw the fear in her eyes. She was sitting up in bed. Her lips shook. No words came from her mouth.

'Oh,' he said, pointing at the blue suit, 'I see we have a visitor. We must be kind to him.'



But first, I must phone my boss to tell him that I can't come to work today. I'll tell him my wife's ill. I'll be back later.' He took the suit along with him.

When Philemon came back he found Matilda crying on the bed. He put the suit down next to her. He pulled up a chair and turned it around so that its back was in front of him. He rested

his chin on his arms. Then he waited for her to stop crying.

After some time her shoulders stopped shaking. She looked up at Philemon. Her husband smiled at her with a strange look in his eyes. He spoke to her with very little feeling, but there was a little bit of humour in his voice.

'We have a visitor, Tilly,' he said without a smile. 'He must eat with us and share everything that we have. We don't have a room for him, so he will have to sleep in our room. You have to look after him very nicely, Tilly. If you lose our visitor, or if anything happens to him ... Matilda, I'll kill you.'



She could see by the look in his eyes that he meant everything he said.

Philemon got up from the chair. He gave his wife a smile and told her to put the man in the wardrobe. As Tilly passed him to get the suit, he turned to go. She thought that he was about to hit her and she jumped out of the way. Philemon stopped.



'You don't understand me, Matilda,' he said.
'We will not have any violence in this house.
Just look after that suit.' Then he went out of the house.

He walked to the Sophiatown Post Office which stands between Sophiatown and Westdene where those unfriendly whites live. He posted his boss's letters. Then he went to the beerhall in Western Native Township. He had never been in the beerhall before. But the noise of the men inside made him feel better. He sat there all day.



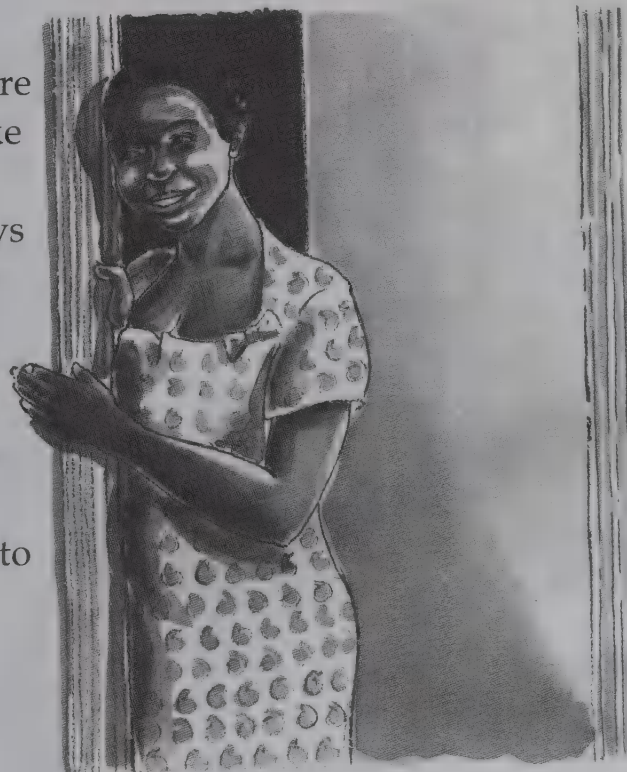
When Philemon came home for supper, there were a few surprises waiting for him. Matilda had made a few nice changes in his little old house. She had given it a woman's touch.

Pretty bright curtains blew in the kitchen window. The old black coal stove had been polished and shined. A clean cloth was on the kitchen table. And supper was cooking on the stove.

Then Matilda came to stand in the doorway of the bedroom. Philemon looked at her. Oh! She was beautiful! He remembered her looking like this when they got married: a young, fresh, dark brown woman who made him tremble with pleasure.

The dress she wore made her look like a little girl. Why did she not always look so pretty, he wondered.

She slid her arm up and down the door frame, slanted her head to one side, and smiled softly at him.



‘What makes a woman like this sleep with another man?’ he wondered.

Philemon wanted to jump out of his chair, take her in his arms and make love to her.

But he fought against this feeling. He closed his eyes and gripped the seat of the chair on both sides.

‘I’m hungry, Tilly,’ he said with a sad sigh. And suddenly that special moment was gone.

Tilly finished the cooking, her hands shaking as they moved quickly from the pots to the cupboards to the table.

She sat down and looked at him. Then she put her hands together and waited for him to pray. But in her heart she prayed that he would stop punishing her.

‘Matilda, our visitor!’ He shouted so loudly that she got a fright. And when she saw the cruel look in his eyes, she jumped up and ran out of the room, knocking down her chair.



She came back with the suit on a hanger and stood there shaking like a leaf. She looked at him, frightened and helpless. The anger in his face was gone. But he still breathed heavily, his throat moving up and down.

‘Put a chair there,’ he pointed. Matilda moved quickly and quietly. She fetched a chair and brought it to the table.

‘Now let our friend sit at the table.’

Matilda hung the suit over the chair.

‘No, no,’ Philemon shook his head. ‘Not like that. Let him sit on the chair like a visitor would sit.’

Philemon was not finished yet. ‘Dish up some food for our visitor, Tilly,’ he said. ‘Give him a lot of food. I don’t think he has eaten anything all day, the poor man.’

Matilda fed the suit as she was told to do. But she felt deeply ashamed. She looked at Philemon and wondered why he was punishing her in such a strange way.



Philemon got up quickly to open the window for some fresh air. And again she jumped with fright. He sat down and ate his supper. And, for the first time in that house, he did not pray. With his mouth full he showed with his hand that she should sit. She sat down and tried to eat. But she could not swallow the food. And then the tears flowed from her eyes again.

Philemon did not say or do anything about her crying. After supper he took the dishes off the table and started washing them. He threw a dry cloth at her and she dried the dishes. As they

washed and dried they said not a word to each other. But if you could have seen them in their kitchen you would have thought they were a happy couple.

After washing up, he took the suit and turned to her. 'That's how I want it every meal, every day,' he said. Then he went into the bedroom.

The feeding of the suit carried on day after day. Sometimes Matilda felt that this punishment was not too bad. She even tried to make a joke out of having the suit as a visitor. But as the weeks passed she began to wish more and more that Philemon would stop punishing her.

Philemon did not bother her too much. As long as she fed the suit every time they sat down to have a meal.

But one day he told Tilly that the visitor needed to go for a walk. So the suit was taken to the dry-cleaners during the week. And on Sunday Philemon and Matilda dressed up to go out.

Matilda had to carry the suit on its hanger over her back. The three of them walked down Ray Street. They passed the church crowd in front of the Anglican Church. The crowd saw nothing strange about a woman carrying a suit. But Matilda felt shame. She felt as if everyone knew

why she was carrying the suit.

But Philemon just walked on down the street. He led her down Ray Street and turned into Main Road. Every now and then he stopped to look into shop windows or to greet a friend passing by.



They walked up Toby Street and turned into Edward Road. Then they walked back home. For Philemon the walk was just a Sunday afternoon outing. But for Matilda every step was filled with shame.

At home Philemon opened a book. 'Give our visitor a rest now, Tilly,' he said. Then he sat down and began to read his book.

Matilda went to the bedroom to hang up the suit. 'Things cannot go on like this,' she said to herself. She thought about talking to Philemon about this suit that was making her life so unhappy. But then she remembered that first day when she had forgotten to feed the suit. She remembered the anger in her husband's eyes. No, she was too frightened to speak to him.

She thought of running away from home. But where could she go? Home to her mother? Her mother would want to know why she had left Philemon. What would she tell her mother?

She thought of leaving Philemon. She knew other young women who were now divorced, who were free.



Staff Nurse Kakile was divorced. But these days she drank heavily. And when she got drunk the boys of Sophiatown passed her around. Matilda trembled with fear when she thought about Staff Nurse Kakile. 'No,' she said to herself, 'I will not get divorced.'

Then Matilda had a very good idea. She knew a place here in Sophiatown where there were many good married women. When the Government started Bantu Education they

closed down all private schools. Father Harringay of the Anglican Church knew that many black people would not get a good education. So he started cultural clubs for the people of Sophiatown. And one of these clubs was for married women.

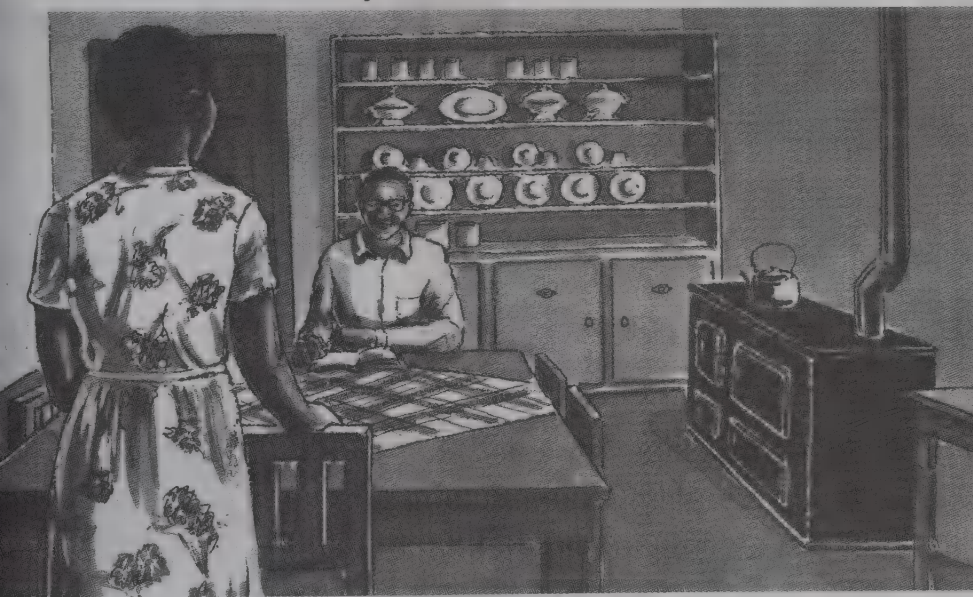
Matilda wanted to join this club. If she joined she could spend time with married women like herself. This would help her forget about her unhappy life here at home with Philemon and this silly suit.

And none of those women in the club knew what shame she was going through at home. Philemon had not told anyone. Yes, this was a good idea. She would ask Philemon if she could join. She must ask him nicely.

Philemon was still reading his book. She was afraid to disturb him, she did not know how to ask him. They had talked so little for so long.

She stood in front of him and watched him quietly while he read his book. After a while he looked up with a frown on his face.

She decided to take a chance. 'Phil, I'd like to join one of those cultural clubs for married women. Would you mind?'



Philemon rubbed his nose between finger and thumb while he thought about this.

'Mmmm,' he said, nodding his head. 'I think that's a good idea. It will stop you from being so unhappy here all day. Yes, you may, Tilly.' Then he went on reading his book.

Tilly joined the cultural club and liked it from the start. She met many married women like herself. They were not being punished by their

husbands. But, like her, they also had lots of free time. They all did good things at the club. And they learned a lot too.

They had bazaars to collect money for the poor. They had sports and music for young people. And Tilly spent a lot of time in meetings, making plans and talking.

Tilly liked all these new things in her life. She began to be more positive about life. And Philemon gave her all the time she wanted.

Tilly's home life had not changed. She still had to look after that silly suit. But she didn't mind that too much. Now that she was in the cultural club it seemed like such a small thing.

Then one day she thought about having a party for her friends and their husbands. Philemon said it was all right and he even gave her extra money for it.

Tilly was surprised by Philemon's kindness. But of course she didn't know that he also wanted to have the party. It was hard for her to be punished all the time. But it was also hard for him to keep on punishing her.

For a week Tilly was very busy getting ready for the party: she baked cakes, made new dresses, and bought three different kinds of meat.



There was beef for the gatecrashers; mutton for the ordinary guests; turkey and chicken for the cultural club guests. So much to eat, Philemon thought. It seemed as if Tilly was going to feed thousands of people.

Sunday, the day of the party! And Matilda's guests began to come. She smiled and greeted them all. Philemon was surprised at how warmly his wife welcomed her guests.



There was a long table with delicious food and lovely flowers. Matilda seated all her guests around the table. There were always gatecrashers at Sophiatown parties. And they were here too, filling up the yard. Matilda gave them their share of food. The party was now ready to begin.

But Philemon did not want the party to begin yet. Matilda saw the frown on his face.

'Tilly,' he said, 'where is our special guest?'

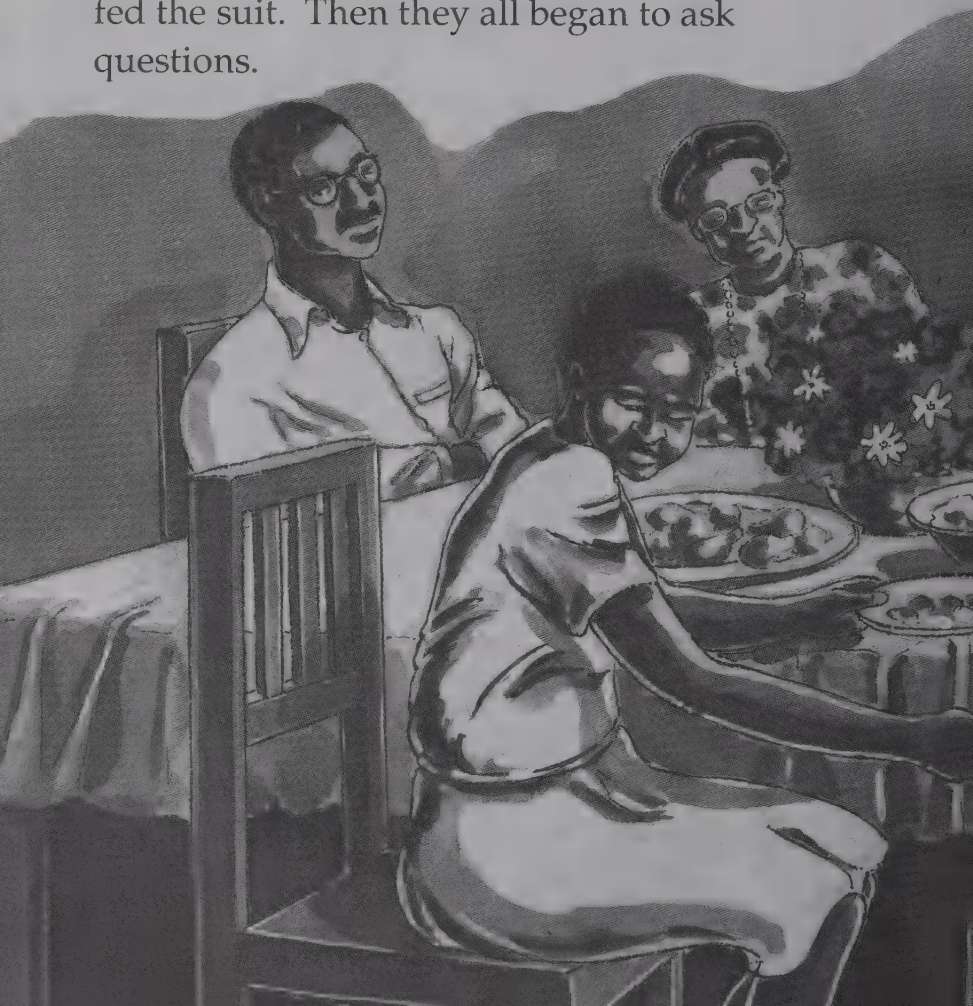
Matilda took a chance. 'Can't we leave him, Phil?' she begged. 'Just for today.'

'Matilda!' he shouted, 'get our visitor! Or are you ashamed of him?'



This question made her face turn ash-grey. She went to the room and fetched the suit. She came back and put the suit on a chair. Then she put a plate of food before it.

Of course the guests did not understand what was happening. They sat and watched as Tilly fed the suit. Then they all began to ask questions.



'What's going on, Philemon?' asked a woman.

'Why must she give a suit food?' asked a man.

Philemon moved his head towards Matilda.

'Ask my wife,' he said, 'she knows this man
better than I do.'



They all waited for Tilly to tell them why she was feeding the suit. For a moment she could not speak, she felt too ashamed and unhappy. Then she said: 'It's just a game that my husband and I play at mealtime.' Nobody believed her and they all laughed.

The party went on. Every time Philemon gave Matilda a sharp look, she ran to give the suit more food. And this made the guests laugh more and more. They enjoyed this strange game that this husband and wife were playing.

But for Matilda it was not a game. It was a hot poker being pushed down her throat.

After the party Philemon went off with one of the guests. The man wanted to show him a house where they could buy 'genuine stuff boy, genuine stuff.'



Philemon came home late that night, very drunk.



He crashed through his kitchen door and staggered to the bedroom. And that's where he saw Tilly.

In Sophiatown they say 'Cook out of the head'. This means that a drunk person has such a great shock, that no matter how drunk he was, he is now sober. This is what happened to Philemon when he saw his dead wife lying on the bed.

She had a look on her face that seemed to beg for just a little love. For a lover to hold her in his arms, just a little, just once, just one more time.

Philemon felt a deep, burning pain in his heart as he cried, 'Tilly!'





Word list

ashamed (pages 24, 35, 38) - embarrassed

bathtub (page 3) - a big basin to wash yourself in

bazaars (page 32) - the sale of goods to raise money
for the poor

complained (page 6) - said they do not like
something

creased (pages 1, 14) - the way cloth looks before it
is ironed, with lines and folds in it

croaking (page 11) - the sound your voice makes
when you are very angry, a low harsh sound

cultural club (pages 30, 31, 32, 33) - a group of
people who meet from time to time to
share and learn different skills

divorced (pages 28, 29) - when a husband and wife
are no longer married

disappointed (page 8) - sad because you did not get
what you wanted

disturb (page 30) - to stop someone doing something

files (page 5) - cardboard folders to keep letters or
other papers in

frown (pages 30, 35) - an angry or worried look

Ghana (page 9) - one of the first countries in Africa
to win independence from Britain

guest (pages 33, 34, 35, 36, 38) - people who you
invite to your home

lawyer (page 5) - a person whose job is to advise
people about the law

normally (pages 12, 15) - mostly

pleasure (page 21) - a very good feeling

praise (page 9) - to speak highly of someone or
something

private schools (page 30) - schools that were not run
by the Government

punish (pages 22, 24, 26, 31, 32) - hurting someone
because he or she has done
something wrong

queue (page 8) - the single line of people where you
wait for a bus or taxi

quietly (pages 24, 30) - without making a sound

rain cape (pages 2, 5) - a loose coat which fastens at
your neck and hangs over your
shoulders to stop the rain from
wetting you

refused (page 6) - would not allow

reported (page 9) - told about what happened

Russia (page 9) - seen to be a communist country
when 'The Suit' was written

sigh (page 22) - to let out your breath slowly and
with a soft sound

special (pages 22, 35) - something very good which
does not happen every day

staggered (page 39) - walked like drunk people walk

strange (pages 2, 18, 24, 26, 38) - not normal, not
what you normally know

stream (page 3) - water or other liquid that flows in
one direction

surprises (pages 20, 32, 34) - things that you did not
know would happen

swerved (page 12) - when a bus or car has suddenly
changed direction

swooshing (page 16) - making a sound like the wind

talkative (page 9) - fond of talking

tip-toed (page 1) - walked quietly on one's toes

tremble (pages 21, 29) - shake

trick (page 4) - a clever way to do something

visitor (pages 16, 18, 22, 24, 26, 28, 35) - someone
who visits you, who comes to your house to talk

wardrobe (pages 15, 16, 19) - a cupboard to hang
clothes in

welcomed (page 34) - showed that you were happy
to see somebody

the West (page 9) - countries in Europe that have a
capitalist government. Some of these
are: the United States, England,
and Holland

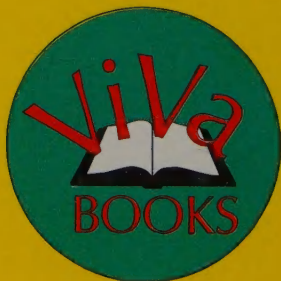
Well Known Stories

Philemon lives in Sophiatown with his wife Tilly. He loves her very much. He works in town for a lawyer. Philemon is not rich or poor. He is happy with life. He is an ordinary South Africa man.

Then one day he catches his wife in bed with another man. And Philemon's and his wife's lives change in a strange and terrible way.

The Suit is Can Themba's most famous story. Can Themba has published many stories during his lifetime. He is one of the many famous writers of the 1950s whose writings are still popular today.

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