Jim stood at the bottom of the stairs, next to the pavement. He held a parcel in his hand. It was a small box, wrapped like a gift. It felt a bit heavy. He did not know the contents. He had strict instructions not open it. "DO NOT DARE...!" He shuddered. He looked up. The stairs led to the entrance of a glass-walled building. They appeared shiny as lights from the street and the building shone on them. Jim placed the parcel at his feet and took out a small piece of paper from his pocket. He glanced at it and put it back. He picked up the box and went up the stairs. He stopped midway. He felt some pain on his hip-joint. He placed a hand on his hip and exhaled deeply. He went up. He stopped at the entrance of the shop. There was a bold sign hanging from the inside. It read "CLOSED". He looked around. The was no sign of anyone. He could see rows of clothes and footwear through the glass. I should go back, he thought. He looked at the parcel in his hand. He thought of leaving it at the door. He then heard some indistinct chatter coming from inside the shop. He knocked on the entrance.

"We're closed!" Someone shouted from inside.

Jim turned to leave. He must have made a mistake, he thought. As he went down the stairs, he reached into his back pocket and took out a small mobile phone. He dialed a number. Just then, a heard a door open behind him. He hung up the call and turned around. There was a man standing at the entrance of the shop, leaning on the frame.

"Jim?" The man called.

Jim nodded.

The man beckoned to him to come inside. Jim hesitated.

"Come!"

Jim walked back up. The man stood aside and let him inside.

"Did anyone follow you?" He asked Jim, looking around.

Jim shook his head.

The man locked the door and took the parcel from Jim. He led Jim through the isles to the back of the shop. They came to a partially opened door. The man pushed the door slightly and ushered Jim inside. He closed the door behind them. The room

appeared to be a store. There were shelves on either side, with piles of boxes both on the floor and on the shelves. The room was stuffy and smelt of a mixture of cigarette smoke and dampness. It was poorly lit, with a loose, low-hanging bulb on the ceiling. Another man emerged from behind a shelf. He took some boxes from the floor and placed them on one another. He did not seem to notice Jim and the other man.

"Lee," the first man said, putting down the box, "he's here..."

Lee took more boxes from the floor and placed them on the shelf. Then he turned around for the first time.

"Spider's boy?" He asked, walking up to Jim.

"Yes," the first man replied, leaning on the door.

Lee studied Jim for a while. Jim felt uneasy. Lee took the parcel and placed it on the floor. He knelt down on one knee and unwrapped it. He pulled away the paper and took a pen-knife from his pocket. He cut the top of the box open. He nodded. He rose up and came to Jim. He lifted him slightly by the chin.

"What's your name?"

"Jim..."

"Do you know who I am?"

Jim shook his head.

The man's breath choked him. He noticed a scar on Lee's left cheek, in the shape of a 'C'. His blood-shot eyes scared him. Suddenly, there was a thud. Lee let him go and turned around. Some boxes had fallen from the shelf.

"Leave!" Lee shouted, as he rushed to pick up the boxes.

"Let's go." The first man said, pulling Jim by the shoulder.

As they left, a phone rang behind them.

"Yes, Spider, " Lee answered. "The gift has arrived."

He hung up.

The man opened the exit and let Jim out. He closed the door and went back inside. A myriad of questions flooded Jim's mind. Holding onto the grills, he slowly went down the stairs. He had delivered the parcel as ordered. But who were these men? What was in the parcel? He looked back for a moment. The lights at the shop went off. He

stepped into the pavement. He felt a sharp headache on the side. He was fatigued. The bright headlights from vehicles almost blinded him. He partially covered his eyes with his palm. The streets were almost deserted. He could not tell what time it was. Most businesses were closed. Some security guards paced up and down, while others stood still outside the shops. Limping, he crossed the road and went up the street. He could not wait to get home and put what had been the darkest day of his life behind him.

It had been a normal Saturday, calm and quiet, with nothing out of the ordinary. Jim was going about his usual weekend chores and activities. His mother was at the market, where she was a trader. She would be back late in the evening, as usual. John, his closest friend, had come over, as he did on most weekends. They both lived in The Valley Estate, one of the oldest in the city. It was located on a valley. The estate was the farthest from the city center. An old railway line cut across the estate. The area had once been a dense forest. From the higher ground, the remnants of the forest could be seen far in the horizon. Like most houses in the neighborhood, Jim's house was built from wood,

and coated with oil. A thick hedge surrounded the compound. There was a small garden in the backyard. Today, John seemed more excited than usual.

"What is it?" Jim asked, curiously.

"What?"

"You're hiding something from me."

"It's nothing..." John said, bouncing the ball on the wall.

"Just tell me..."

"Ok...It's...."

"What?"

"We have been invited to a party..." John said.

"A party?" Jim was surprised.

He could not think of any of their friends who had a party.

"Where?" He asked, sitting under a shade.

“Out of town...It's someone 'important...’."

"What is his name?" Jim asked.

"It's..." John scratched his head.

"You don't know him?"

"They call him...Spider..."

He took the ball and went over to Jim. He put the ball down and sat on it.

"Spider?" Jim was more surprised.

"Yes."

"I don't know anyone by that name," Jim said, thoughtfully.

"It doesn't matter, he knows us." John said. "The party is in the evening...Today..."

Jim was quiet for a while.

"What's wrong?" John asked.

"I'm not going... "

"Why not? It's just a party."

"John, we don't know that man. Besides, it's getting late." Jim said, looking at the skies.

"Just get ready," John said, rising up. He took the ball under his arm. "We'll be back as soon as it's over."

"John..."

"Are you afraid?" John said mockingly. "Don't worry, I'll take you..."

A car screeched to a stop suddenly in front of Jim and hooted. An angry driver pulled down the window and shouted at Jim. He was walking in the middle of the road. Someone pushed Jim from behind into the pavement. He stumbled and supported himself on a street light. The car drove past him. It was becoming darker and darker he went further from town. His legs were failing him. They were almost numb. He felt like his body was burning, despite the cold. The headache was getting worse. He came to the railway line and crossed it. He took a narrow path and went down the slope. It was pitch dark.

Jim and John were far from town. It was late in the evening. John insisted that he knew the venue. The high-rise building was not familiar to Jim.

He had never been to this part of the city before. It was a luxury hotel. The name was engraved on a wall at the entrance: THE KING'S WEB HOTEL. They went in. There were numerous lights all over, which shone on the gardens, giving the place a beautiful appearance. There was a sign reading "WELCOME TO THE KING'S WEB HOTEL". They were awed. Jim walked behind John quietly, glancing all over the compound. John waved at a man on one of the balconies. The man waved back. He signaled them to come up. Jim was more puzzled.

"Who is he?" Jim asked.

"A friend," John replied, smiling. "He's the one who told me about the party."

They took the elevator and went up. John and the man greeted each other like old friends. Jim stood aside.

“I see you brought your friend..." The man said.

"Yes,” said John. He turned to Jim. "This is Juma..."

Juma patted Jim on the shoulder.

"I thought you wouldn't come..." Juma said to John.

"I couldn't miss it!"

"Follow me," Juma said, adjusting his cap.

They followed Juma through a long corridor and took a left turn. They came to a door at the far end. Juma glanced back at the two friends. John smiled and whispered to Jim. He bent down and tightened his shoe laces. Juma opened the door and let them in. It was a large hall. To their surprise, there was no one inside. The place was dead quiet. They looked at each other. There were large tables one side and a few a chairs placed randomly around the hall. A chandelier hung from the roof. There was a large painting mounted on the wall. Juma locked the door and went to an inner room.

"John, are you sure there's a party here?"

"Maybe we're just early..." John murmured.

Jim's heart pounded fast as he came closer to his house. Suddenly, he stopped and turned around. He thought he heard footsteps behind him. There was no one. He quickened his steps and came to the gate. He bent forward and unhooked the chain from the inside. He pushed the gate open went in. The dog barked and came running towards

him, wagging its tail. His mother lifted a window curtain and peered outside. She opened the door.

"Jim, what are you looking at?" John asked.

Jim pointed at the ceiling. There appeared to be some broken lines painted on the roof, in black, in an almost circular manner, with some crisscrossing each other. Jim walked forward and took a closer look. It looked like a...No... Yes...It was a spider's web! Just then, footsteps echoed in the hall. John Jim pinched Jim. Juma came into the hall. He was talking on the phone.

"Yes, Boss," Juma said. He hung up.

"Where is the party?" John asked him, excitedly.

"Party?" Juma said, placing the phone on a chair. He came up to John. "What party?"

"But...You told me..." John was shocked. "You invited us..!"

Juma grinned. There was silence for a moment. The two friends were dumbfounded.

"Go home!" Juma burst out, all of a sudden.

"You told me there was a party!" John protested.

"Let's go," Jim said to John, taking his hand.

Reluctantly, John followed him. As they came to the door, Juma came from behind them and pulled Jim by the shoulder.

"Not you, "he said to Jim, "you're staying."

"Me? Why?" Jim was surprised.

Juma pushed John into the corridor." Go!"

He slammed the door on John's face. Panicked, Jim grabbed the handle in an attempt to escape. However, Juma's strong fist sent him sprawling on the floor, groaning in pain. Blood gushed out of his nose and spilled on the floor. Juma took him by the collar and dragged him to the middle of the room.

"*Niache! Niache!*" Jim screamed (Let me go! Let me go!).

Jim fought, trying to free himself from Juma's grip. He failed. Juma overpowered him. Jim bit his hand. Juma lifted him and threw him on the floor, knocking his head on a wall. Jim screamed in pain.

"Help! Help!" He cried.

"Shhhh! Quiet!" Juma silenced him. "Quiet!"

He took picked up the phone from the chair and a made a call.

"Yes, Boss, “he said. "I have him..." He placed the phone on Jim's ear.

"Hello, Jim," a rough voice said on the other end. "Do not be afraid. We're your friends..."

Jim was quiet.

"Has Juma hurt you?" Jim looked at the man in front of him. Juma grinned. "Please forgive him," the voice said calmly. "I'm Spider. I want you to do something for me. Then you'll go home...Ok?"

Juma rose up, placing the phone back on his ear

"Give him the package,” Spider said.

"Yes, Boss... But..."

"What is it?"

"He’s too young..." Juma said in a low tone, turning away from Jim.

"Is there a problem?"

"No."

Juma hung up. He went to the inner room. In that instant, Jim shot to the door and turned the knob. To his disappointment, the door did not open.

"Do you want the key?" Juma emerged from the room, holding a small, brown box in his hand.

He placed the box on the floor. He took a shiny paper and wrapped it on the box. He pulled out a small notebook from his pocket and scribbled something. He plucked out the paper and placed the pen on a chair

"Take it to this place", he said to Jim, giving him the paper.

Jim hesitated.

"Pick it up!"

Jim took the paper and picked up the box.

"Do not stop anywhere," Juma said, unhooking the keys from his waist. He went to the door. "Do not talk to anyone... Understood?"

Jim nodded. Juma picked a key and inserted it into the keyhole. He turned the knob.

"If you try to run..." He turned to Jim. “Remember that we know where you live..."

He opened the door. "Go."

Jim stepped into the hallway.

"Wait!'' Juma said. "Keep this with you at all times..." He gave a cellphone to Jim. "Go." Juma closed the door.

The corridors were dead silent. Bright bulbs lit the corridors all the way. He could hear some echoes from afar. He spotted someone vanish into a corner with a mop and a bucket in their hand. Jim pressed the button at the elevator and waited. He felt something dripping his down his nose. He lifted his hand and rubbed the nose with the back of his palm. It was blood. He tried to control his tears. He brushed his hand over his face. He felt like he was in a bad dream. He wished that he had stayed home. The elevator opened. Jim went in. As he went out of the hotel, he glanced back. He remembered John. Where was he? He took out the piece of paper which he had been given by Juma. The handwriting was illegible. He stopped under a security light and tried to read it. He held the paper directly under the light. The words were joined together. He tried to figure out the letters. "B...E...5..." No, "S...L..." No... "T...BEST..." He strained his eyes. "H...E...A...R. BEST HEAR...BEST WEAR..." Yes, BEST WEAR...

"*Kijana!*" A security shouted. "What are you doing there?"

Jim folded the paper and walked away slowly, with a limp. His felt pain in his joints. He thought his knee was fractured. He took the main road which led back to town. It was far. He could see the skyscrapers far away in the distance. From afar, the skyscrapers appeared like clusters of stars. Some looked like dark blocks joined together. He walked slowly. It was a long way back to town. He did not have a single coin on him. The parcel felt a bit heavy. He changed hands. He finally arrived at the town center. He crossed street to street, desperately looking for the "BEST WEAR" building. He was exhausted. He would stop for a moment in the middle of a street to catch his breath. The pain on his knee was killing him. He could not find the building. He leaned on an electricity pole and put down the parcel. He buried his head in his hands for a moment. When he lifted his eyes, some colorful lights on a building a few meters down the street caught his attention. The lights would go on and off, on and off, changing colors each time. There appeared to be some writings beneath the lights. Yes! He exclaimed. He picked up the box and walked to the building to take a closer look. His eyes lit up. The name on the building was BET WEAR,

written stylishly. There was a space between the 'E' and the 'T'. The 'S' was missing.

"Jimmy, where were you?" Mama Jim asked.

She was standing at the door, with a torch in her hand. Jim approached her slowly. He was afraid she would notice the limp.

"I was..." He sneezed. "I was..."

Suddenly, there was a loud bang at the gate. The dog barked. There was strong wind. The gate fell ajar. The wind knocked chain against the gate.

"Lock the gate!" Mama Jim shouted.

She switched off the torch and went back inside.

Jim closed the gate and put the chain back. Just then, he felt a vibration in his pocket. It was the phone he had been given by Juma. He panicked for a moment.

"Jimmy!" His mother called from the house.

The phone vibrated again. He looked towards the door for a minute. He took out the phone. The number was hidden. He placed the phone on his ear.

"Hello, Jim," said the caller.

How could he forget that voice? It was the "Boss".

"You did well today..."

Jim was quiet.

"Lee wants more gifts..." The Boss coughed on the phone. "Wait for my call tomorrow..."

"You said you'd leave me alone!" Jim protested.

The Boss had already hung up.

"Jimmy! What are you doing outside?" His mother was at the door.

He hurriedly slid the phone into his pocket. He walked to the house. He went straight to the cupboard and opened the top drawer. He fumbled inside and then he closed the drawer. He opened the middle one.

"What are you looking for?" His mother asked.

"I have a headache..."

She placed her palm on his forehead.

"You have a fever. Are you sick?"

She reached the top of the cupboard and took a small container. She opened it and took out some tablets.

"Take these..." She said, giving him the tablets. "Why is your face swollen?"

"I fell..."

She examined him for a while.

"Don't stay out that late again," she said. "It's not safe."

She went into the kitchen.

Jim could not sleep. He turned over and over. The Boss' words echoed in his mind. There was something in the man's tone which scared Jim. Why did he tell him to wait for his call? Jim wondered. Did he mean that Jim would take more parcels to…to...What was the place? No, no I will not do it. He would destroy the phone or throw it in the latrine. Spider would not reach him. Ah...! Spider! That was the Boss' name! He pushed away the blanket and sat up. He had felt that there was something suspicious about the parcel. He did not what it was. What if was...Drugs? He shuddered. His heart beat fast. For a moment, he felt angry, angry at his friend John and angry at himself. He blamed

himself for listening to John. He wished that he had not followed him. How did he know Spider or Juma, the man who and given him the parcel? Jim wondered. Why had they picked him and not John? A branch break and fall on the roof with a thud, cutting short his trail of thoughts. The roof rattled in the wind. He laid back on the bed, facing the ceiling. He could not find answers to his questions. He took a deep breath. Everything was a mystery.

A black fancy-looking car with tinted windows pulled up in front of John as he was about to cross the road. He stopped suddenly. It was around 4pm in the evening. He was just a few meters from the school. The road was busy. Students were all over. Some walked in different directions, alone and in groups, while others were crossing at the zebra crossing. John went around the car and came to the road. Before he could cross, he heard someone call his name.

"John!"

John turned around.

A man with a red cap came emerged from the car and beckoned at him. John could not recognize the stranger.

"Come," the man said.

John hesitated. He looked at the car and then at the stranger. Who was he? How did he know his name?

"I'm just a friend." The man said, with a smile on his face. "Come."

John went to the car.

"I'm Juma", the stranger said, stretching his hand towards John.

"You know me?" John asked, shaking Juma's hand.

"The Boss knows everyone," Juma said, gesturing at the car. "He wants to invite you to a party..." He said.

There was a passenger at the back seat.

"A party?" John was surprised.

"Yes," Juma said. "Everyone will be there..."

"When?"

"Tomorrow, in the evening. Juma replied. He took out a card from his pocket and handed it to John.

"What is this?" John asked, reading the card.

"The venue," Juma replied, opening the car door. "And bring your friend..."

John looked across the road. Jim was waving at him.

Juma got into the car and drove off. He put the card into his pocket and crossed the road excitedly.

Jim woke up with a start. He was soaked in sweat. He was on the floor. He had had a nightmare. He felt exhausted. His whole body ached. He pushed away the bedsheets and got out of the bed. He stretched himself and yawned. A rooster crowed. He put on his sandals and went to the door. Last night's events replayed in his mind. He closed his eyes and tried to shut out the thoughts. He heard a church bell tolling in the distance. He went to the bathroom, poured some water into a basin and washed his face. He stared into the bathroom mirror for a moment. His eyes were red. His face was swollen. There was a small lump just above his left eyebrow. He touched it. It was painful. He took a towel and wiped his face. He

went to the living room and sat down. His mother was in the kitchen. He picked up the remote and switched on the television. They had breakfast quietly. His mother went to church. Jim stayed back. The day dragged on. Jim fell asleep on the chair. He woke up later in the afternoon. He felt relaxed. He stretched himself and went outside. It was hot. The sun was high. The dog was sleeping in the shade. Suddenly, something crossed his mind. The phone! He rushed back into the house and went to his bedroom. He lifted the mattress and took out the phone. There was no call. He felt relieved. He decided to go to the backyard and destroy the phone. As he went for the door, he heard some movement in the sitting room. He stopped.

"Jimmy!"

His mother was back from church. Quickly, he took his bag from the wall, opened the zipper and threw the phone inside. He hung the bag back on the wall and went out. Sunday passed. On Monday, he went to school as usual. Tuesday came and went by. Then Wednesday, Thursday....The week flew by. Jim had forgotten about everything that had happened on that terrible Saturday. Life was back to normal. There was nothing unusual. He was busy at school. In the evening, he would go to the pitch with his

friends for games. Sometimes, he would pass by his mother's stall at the market. He was happy, as always, and relieved. Little did he know that his relief would be short-lived.

Fridays were full of anxiety. Everyone impatiently waited for the final bell. When it finally rang, students stormed out of the gate like a swarm of bees, some shouting excitedly. After crossing the road, Jim took the route which led to the market. He removed his sweater and swung it across shoulder. He loosened his school tie and unbuttoned partly his shirt because of the heat. The market was located at a major junction. He took the flyover and crossed to the other side. He headed towards the old, rusty market gate. The gate always leaned backwards. There were throngs of people at the entrance. Jim squeezed himself through the crowd and went in, holding his school bag tightly. He almost collided with a cart full of sacks, being pushed by a sweaty, muscular man with protruding veins. The man cursed as he went past Jim. He adjusted his bag and stepped aside suddenly next to a stall. Another cart was coming his way. His mother's stall was at the farthest end of the market. He quickened his pace, fighting his way through the crowds. As he came to the clearer section of the market, he realized that there was a phone ringing

continuously. He ignored it at first but it seemed to follow him. It was the same ringtone. It sounded closer each time. He could see his mother at the stall on the other side. She seemed to be wrapping some items in bags while arranging others on the stall. The phone was still ringing. He stopped for a moment. Then it dawned on him. No, No, it can't be! He quickly removed his bag from across his shoulder and placed it on his lap. He opened it. He fumbled through the books sand then...The phone! It was ringing from his bag! He panicked. With his hand shaking, he took out phone. He had completely forgotten about this phone. He had not destroyed it. It was right there, in his hand! How could I forget? He could not believe his eyes. Everything came back to his mind. He remembered the ordeal he had had a few days ago. He remembered the mysterious 'Boss.... the hotel... and...He looked up and saw his mother beckoning at him. The phone went silent, then it rang again. He did not know what to do. He stared at the screen, undecided for moment. Then he picked the call and slowly placed the phone on his ear.

"Hello, Jim," It was that rough, irritating voice. He immediately recognized it.

How he wished he had gotten rid of the phone!

"Do you remember me?" The caller asked.

Jim did not respond.

"Move!" Someone shouted at Jim and went past him, knocking Jim on the side.

"It's your friend..." Spider said.

"We're not friends!" Jim finally found his voice. “We’re not friends!"

"What are you buying at the market?"

Terrified, Jim looked around. Was the man here? Was he following him?

"Go to the hotel. Now...!" The man's tone changed.

"No!"

"What are you buying at the market?"

Jim suddenly felt afraid. The "Boss" was here! He was really watching him. Jim could not tell who it was among the crowds of people.

"Now will you do as I say?"

The hotel towered before Jim. It dwarfed all the other buildings around it. It was in this in this same place where he had experienced the worst day of his life. The building appeared like some mysterious creature, waiting to devour him. He felt like he was reliving the nightmare. He had never thought he would ever come back to this place. He blamed himself for being a coward. He feared a man he could not see. He should have resisted. He had brought the misery upon himself. He wanted to run but he could not. He knew that Spider would find him. He knew where Jim went to school. He knew about his mother...Suddenly, he remembered her. She must have waited for him at for eternity. It was late. He did not know what he would tell her when he went back home. Maybe he would not come out of the building alive. Slowly, he approached the giant gate and went in, casting his eyes up and down and sideways, not knowing what he was looking for. He went to an elevator and stopped. He wanted turn back and run. He felt like he was deliberately walking into a furnace. Reluctantly, he pressed the button. He went in.

"You're back!" It was Juma. "Welcome!"

He spread his out his hands as if to hug Jim. Jim pushed him away.

"You're still angry...” Juma said, mockingly. "Come.”

He led Jim into the inner room. His brown, baggy jeans were sagged, with large bulging pockets, whose contents seemed to pull the trousers further down as he walked. He wore a white cap and a chain around his neck, partly buried in his T-shirt. As he opened the door of the room, he pulled up the trousers with one hand. Jim followed him inside. Juma closed the door. He squatted next to the wall and took out a block of some white substance from a large brown box. Carefully, he wrapped it with a shiny paper and placed into a smaller box. Standing up, he took the block and handed it to Jim.

"Same place, like last time," he said to Jim. "Put it in your bag."

"Again?" Jim muttered.

"Yes, 'again'..." Juma said. "Go."

With regret, Jim found himself lying to everyone, his mother and friends, about his whereabouts, his sudden disappearances from home and his frequent absences from school. Revealing his secret job would be risking his life, he thought, as he was

threatened, not once or twice but severally. He thought he had once spotted Juma around his neighborhood. He was always paranoid and distracted, whether at home or at school. He was always staring out of the window. He felt like he was being watched. The days seemed longer than usual. He would take the drugs to Lee's shop almost on a daily basis, as ordered. He came to learn that the drug was known as "Dust". Lee and his men would pack the drugs into bigger boxes. They would then be loaded into a truck. Jim did know where truck went. Jim was not alone in the 'job'. There were other 'delivery boys', as they were referred to, some much younger than him. He would bump into them as they picked up their 'parcels' at the hotel and other designated spots, with Spider's men shouting instructions at them. He would spot some at the shop. They looked some miserable and malnourished. They would go in and out of a door at the back of the shop, behind a shelf. Jim had never to the room himself. He was never allowed in, as he was not considered a 'member' yet. To him, it did not matter. He did not mind their disgusting laughter, as they pointed fingers at him. The shop was some kind of meeting point, after the doors were closed. Sometimes it bothered Jim that the front was a cover for the 'bad activities' at the back. How he wished everything would get exposed! And

Lee, oh, Jim hated him! He would go to jail. Jim would be free again. He would get his life back.

It so happened that on one stormy evening, Jim was alone at the shop. Everyone else had left, except Lee. He was sitting on a high stool at the front, resting his head on the wall. The shop was closed. It was raining heavily outside. The thunder rumbled. The lights flickered. Jim wanted to leave but he decided to wait until the rain subsided. Being alone with Lee made him uneasy. The man always scared him to death. He had once witnessed Lee pinning as skinny boy to a wall, strangling him with one hand, as the boy gasped for air. Jim did not know what the boy had done. The image always haunted Jim. The rain seemed to go on forever. He paced up and down. Finally, he sat down on the floor, next to the wall. He felt a drop his face then another one and other one. He looked up. The roof was leaking. He moved to the opposite side. There were boxes lying around randomly. Jim cast his eyes on the boxes before him. He leaned forward and dragged one to his side. It was heavy. The top was partially open. He peered inside. There were several blocks of Dust, the "white substance", inside the box. He inserted his hand into the box and took out a block. He started unwrapping the paper. Then he stopped. He wrapped it and put the block back.

"Are you stealing my property?" A voice boomed.

Jim was startled. Lee was standing before him. He immediately regretted having touched the box.

"I...I am not...stealing..." He said, shakily.

The image of the boy whom Lee had been strangling flashed before him. He wanted to run. He was trapped between Lee and the wall.

"Please...forgive me..." Jim begged, kneeling at Lee's feet. "Please..."

The thunder rumbled again. A flash of lightning struck through the window. The lights went off.

"Relax," Lee said, squatting before Jim.

Jim could feel Lee's breath on his face. The lights came back on.

"Do you want some?" Lee asked him. "It's alright."

Jim shook his head. Lee lit a cigarette and took a deep puff. Jim coughed. Lee reached into the box and took out a block. He unwrapped it and poured some powder into his hand.

"Give me your hand," he said to Jim.

"Ah?"

"Your hand..."

Jim took a glance at the powder in Lee's palm. Then he stood up and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Lee asked, sniffing the flour. “It’s still raining...come and sit down..."

Jim stopped at door. He could hear hailstones falling on the roof. There was a deafening thunder. The strong wind banged the rain against the glass walls. He wanted to storm out into the rain and go home. He looked back. Lee was sniffing the flour. He sneezed. Jim stood at the door, undecided. He had always been curious about the "flour". He had always fought the urge to open the "parcels". The substance could be dangerous, he always thought. It could kill him. He had seen the younger boys comfortably using it... He felt a great temptation...He closed his eyes for a minute, holding the door with one hand.

"Where is Jim nowadays?" Limo asked John, as they stepped out of the school gate.

"I don't know..." John replied, shrugging shoulders.

"You live closer to him..." Said Limo.

"Yes," John replied, thoughtfully. "I've not seen him in a while..."

The trio, John, Jim and Limo usually left school together. However, of late, Jim had 'disappeared'. It had been two weeks since they had seen him last. He never showed up at the pitch too. John felt that something was wrong. Jim had changed since that day at the hotel. He did not know what had happened after he had left Jim behind. John had never told anyone about the incident. He kept his thoughts to himself.

"What are you thinking?" Limo asked.

"Oh...it's nothing..." John replied, looking far ahead.

Jim felt different, like he had never felt before. It was strange at first. He felt like a new person. For a moment, he had regretted having stretched out his hand to Lee, on that night. Lee had poured some of the powder on Jim's hand. Jim took some on his finger and licked it. Lee had patted him on the shoulder, with a rare smile cracking on the stone-face. Jim had never seen Lee smile or laugh. He had looked at him approvingly. He did not know

why but Jim saw Lee in a new light. The fear he had for the man left him. That night marked the beginning of a new friendship between him and Lee, or so he felt. He would let Jim stay behind at the shop, when everybody else had left. Lee himself would give him the powder. Jim enjoyed the 'special treatment'. He learned quickly, to Lee's pleasure. "Dust" was not as 'deadly' as he had imagined. In fact, it gave him a new kind of 'confidence'. He never felt intimidated by anyone. He would lash out anyone who tried to mock him. He was no longer the timid boy he was before. He ran errands for Spider, the 'mysterious boss', around town. He not yet had a chance to meet him. He had money to buy whatever he wanted; nice clothes, shoes and anything he admired. He even got invited to nice parties. He made new friends. They introduced him to new drugs. He graduated to the 'stronger' ones. He was on top of the world. He felt like a 'boss.

"Hey, you!' A voice thundered.

Jim looked up, terrified. A policeman was approaching him fast, pointing his baton at him.

"What's that in your hand?"

Jim sprang from the stone he was sitting on, jumped over a bush and vanished, leaving his syringe on the ground. He crossed the road and ran, forcing his way through people. He was barefoot. He stopped at a corner and looked back. He could not see the officer. He leaned on a wall to catch his breath. He removed his torn jumper and swung it his shoulder. It was greasy and smelt of sweat. He realized he had lost his syringe. He shrugged his shoulders. He could always get another one. He was angry at the policeman. He bent down and folded his tattered jeans. He walked away.

Jim's transformation did not go unnoticed. Whenever he was at school, would be seen sleeping under the scorching sun in the field. He always looked preoccupied and he never wanted to talk to anyone. He built a wall around himself. He wanted to be alone all the time. This was not the Jim they once knew. He had become dull and inactive. He always looked shaggy and sickly. He was always angry. Everyone avoided him. Not even his friends at Lee's wanted any association with him. They no longer took him to their parties. Everyone would stare at him from a distance, pointing fingers at him and whispering among themselves. He would go to isolated places and sniff the drugs. It was all he wanted. The drugs were the only thing that

relieved him and made him happy. Nothing else mattered.

On one hot Saturday afternoon, Jim was sitting at the front door of his house groaning in pain. His body was shaking, from his shoulders to his toes. He was aching all over. He felt like his whole body was being pierced by thorns. Not even the numerous injections did him any good. They seemed to worsen the situation. He moaned. He thought he would die. The syringe fell from his hand. There were blood stains on his hand. He had pricked his veins with syringe. He was sweating profusely. The sun burned him. He tried to stand up, supporting himself with door. The pain in his joints stung him. His legs felt weak. He fell with a thud on the hard floor, knocking his head on the wall. He screamed. In that moment of agony, his life flashed before him. All of sudden, he regretted everything; from the first day, the day he gotten involved with Spider, to the day he had 'innocently' tasted the powder. It had all happened so fast. He did not even realize it. He had become dependent on the drugs. He could barely function without them. Now he was dying, all alone and there was no one to save him. The confidence he had felt, the pride and the happiness were all an illusion. He saw his own face laughing at him. He saw Lee and Juma

laughing at him. He heard Spider, the faceless boss, laughing him at too, with his rough voice. How foolish he had been! He should have resisted. Childhood memories flooded his mind. He remembered marching around the compound with a salute, like the officers he would see on the television. He had admired their uniform so much! He had wanted to wear one when he grew up. He would tell anyone who cared to listen that he was a police officer. Now his dreams were shattered. It was over. It was all his fault. He remembered those days when he would lock himself in the toilets... He felt tears burning his cheeks. Slowly, he crawled into the house and went toward the sofa on the right corner of the living room. He gathered some strength and spread himself on the sofa. He fell asleep.

"Jimmy!" The voice sounded distant. "Jimmy wake up!"

He felt someone shaking him. "Jimmy!"

He wanted to open his eyes but he could not. He felt too weak to move.

"Jim, wake up!"

Finally, Jim opened his eyes. He could not see clearly. His eyes were foggy. Slowly, he turned on his back. He tried to sit up. His body was still aching. He rubbed his eyes and looked up. His mother was standing before him.

"Are you sick?" She asked, gazing at him.

"No..." Jim murmured.

He could hear his voice. He felt as if there was something stuck in his throat. His mother stretched out her hand and took a mirror hanging from the wall. She held it in Jim's face.

"Who is this?" She asked.

Jim looked into the mirror. He could not recognize the stranger staring back at him. The face was pale and withered, with brownish-black spots all over. His skin looked rough and cracked and it appeared to be falling off in some parts. His lips had a strange color and tiny wound-like spots at the corners. He lifted his hand and touched them with a finger. They felt painful. He rubbed his hand over his head. His hair too looked like it was falling off. The face in the mirror scared him. He looked away. What had happened to him? When did he change so much? Did his mother know about...? He sat upright. His

mother placed the mirror on his lap and left. He buried his head in his hands. He felt tears dropping down his cheeks. He lifted his shirt and rubbed his face.

"Go away!" Lee shouted.

"Please...help me..." Jim begged.

"Leave this place!"

"Please...just one..." Jim pleaded.

He knelt down before Lee. "Just one...!"

He had sworn to stop but he could not. His body begged for more, despite the pain he had felt on that Sunday afternoon. He needed the drugs. He had sworn not to go Lee's ever but he had no choice. To his frustration, Lee locked him out. He did not know what to do or where to go. He saw the others staring at him like he was some strange creature. He strolled away. He found himself at one of the 'corners' where he usually met his friends. They did not seem to pay attention to him. He could not get the powder. He was stressed. Over the next few days, he struggled. On one hand he wanted to leave everything. On the other hand, an invisible force

held him back. As if that was not enough, The Villain himself reached him. He felt hatred burning in him as he held the cellphone in his hand. Why couldn't he just leave him alone?

"Where are you? Why have you not been picking your parcels?"

Jim was quiet

"Answer me!"

"I want to..."

"What?''

"I want...to stop..." Jim murmured.

"Speak up!"

"I want to stop..."

"What? No one quits!" The Boss retorted. "Do you understand?"

"Boss... Please..."

"Have you forgotten who I am? Do you want me to tell your mother about you?"

"Please don't..."

"If you don't show up you'll regret it...!"

The Boss hung up.

Jim was in a nightmare. He had always been afraid of the boss from the start. Jim knew he meant what he said. He feared for his life. He had no choice but to take the parcels to wherever he was ordered. How he wished he was free! He envied the students he saw on the streets. They were happy, unlike him. No one bothered them. His life had turned upside down. He missed his old friends, school and everything in his past life. Today, no one wanted any association with him. He was an outcast. The whole world was against him. It was all because of Spider. Jim was deep in his web. He could not escape. It was then that a solution came to him. It would free him from Spider's web, and from the world that hated him.

Mama Jimmy took out some money from her purse and paid the *mkokoteni* man. He unloaded the sacks and placed them next to her stall. Today, she was late. Usually, she would arrive before sunrise. The market was a beehive of activity. The sun had already risen, although it was partly covered by clouds. She felt

some shivers. She was worried. She murmured to herself as she arranged the stall. She would shake her head occasionally and stare at one spot for long. She was worried. Something was wrong with Jimmy. He was no longer the jovial boy she knew. He always looked sick. Whenever she talked to him he would stare at her, like he did not recognize her. Did he use drugs? No, it was not possible. The mere thought of Jim using drugs frightened her. Maybe he was just sick, although he always insisted that he was not. Today, she would close the stall earlier and take him to the hospital, she said to herself. As she tightened her head-scarf, she saw John, one of Jim's friends, heading in her direction. He looked so healthy...

"Mama Jimmy," someone called her, "are you alright?"

It was one of the market women. Mama Jim wiped her eyes with her *leso* and turned around.

"Yes," she said, smiling.

"Mama Jim..."

Mama Jim looked up. John was standing before her. He looked behind him and then towards the exit. He came closer.

"John, what is it?" Mama Jim asked.

John leaned forward on the stall.

"Mama Jimmy..." He said

"Yes, John..."

John took a deep breath.

"There's something I want to tell you..."

Jim reached into his pocket and took out a small bottle. He was sitting behind a thicket near his home. His dog was at his feet, wagging his tail, desperately trying to get his attention. Jim held the bottle in his hands and observed it. He would free at last, free from the world that hated him and free from Spider's claws. He would never bother Jim again. The nightmare would be over. He heard people laughing on the road. They were laughing at him, the miserable boy who was doomed for life. He was hopeless. He was in a pitch dark tunnel with no exit. He opened the top of the bottle and slowly lifted it to his mouth. He placed the tip on his lips. Heavy clouds gathered in the skies, darkening the day. A tear dropped down his cheek.

John's confession shook Mama Jim with fear. He told her everything, from the day they had been invited to the hotel by the strange man. She was left shocked and speechless. It sounded as if John was referring to a different Jim, other than her son. She could not believe it. She held her chin in her palm, with her mouth ajar, and listened.

"Jim sells the drugs for him..."John said.

What he said next made Mama Jim spring from her stool.

"He was here...at your stall..." He said, almost in a whisper. "It's the *mkokoteni* man..."

"Eeh? Where is he? Who is he?"

The cry of a wailing woman rang the air, cutting through the rain. She was soaked and covered in mud as she rolled on the ground. A dog barked continuously. People watched, murmuring among themselves, as a teenage boy was lifted into a waiting ambulance. Others tried to hold her and pull her away from the rain. She would bang the ambulance, screaming and sobbing

uncontrollably. She did not feel rain, neither did she hear the people trying to console her. As the ambulance sped off, the image of Jim's face played at the back her mind, his eyes looking at her pleadingly, and his lips moving as if he was trying to say something to her. Mama Jim lifted her eyes and, through the rain, she saw a man in a black suit, standing alone, watching her from a higher ground, with a black umbrella in his hand.

Spider looked on from a distance. He slightly leaned on his walking stick as he watched the commotion below. Suddenly, he saw Mama Jim looking in his direction. Did she recognize him? No, there was no chance. There had been hundreds of people at the market. Maybe she was not really looking at him. Then he saw her coming towards him. Mama Jim waded through the mud, barefoot, and went towards the man. It was him. She remembered that face. It was the man John had told her about. Suddenly, she slid and fell on her face. With bitter tears rolling down her face, she lifted a finger and pointed towards the man.