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# Life, Above All

By Dennis Foon

The gates are opening

Amen

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Are your parents late?

No.

Who's coming?

Your papa?

He's working.

Your mother?

Mama's not feeling well.

An uncle?

An aunt?

Come with me.

Don't worry.

There are less costly ones.

There are all kinds

of models for infants.

There is lining all around the coffin.

Sarah will look beautiful

shrouded in white.

All you'll see is her pretty face.

Iris, careful.

Sarah's been sleeping all morning.

Go wake her, I want to go inside.

Wait for Mama to say so.

- Why is Sarah sleeping?

- Because she's a baby.

- I want to come in!

- Not now.

Let me in or I'll tell my father!

Hello, Mama.

Mr. Chauke says he'll come

**for Sarah at 1:**

...and that you shouldn't worry,

it will be a beautiful funeral.

Tell him not to come.

We can't afford it.

- But...

- The money's gone.

- What?

- Someone stole it.

I heard about Sarah.

So sad.  
Jonah! It's Chanda.  
He beat himself with a rock,  
to chase out the demons.  
Not hard enough!  
You're funny!  
Mr. Chauke is coming for Sarah

**at 1:**

One o'clock!  
What are you doing?  
It's to bury Sarah.  
Hey! Give that back!  
Give that money back!  
Look who decided to come to school!  
Chanda!  
Where were you this morning?  
It's my little sister.  
She passed away.  
I'm sorry.  
Stay home a few days.  
Becca! Calm down!  
Esther!  
Don't look at me like that!  
You skip classes, so do I.  
What is it?  
Sarah?  
I'm sorry.  
Really sorry.  
Hello, Mrs. Tafa.  
Can I phone Mama's family?  
I came by this morning,  
but nobody answered.  
I'm sorry.  
It's Sarah.  
I heard.  
Hey, you!  
Go play somewhere else!  
Now!  
Mama doesn't want them to know.  
Your mother is a wise woman.  
Can I call the family from your house?  
It's your mama  
who should do the calling.

The funeral is Thursday.

Yes.

Please let them know, Mr. Kamwendo.

Goodbye.

Sarah's death is so sad.

Just like my Emmanuel's.

At least they died pure.

Everyone knows

Sarah died of influenza...

...and that my Emmanuel was killed  
during that awful robbery.

No one can spread rumors  
or point fingers.

You understand what I'm saying?

Do you?

Do you or don't you?

Mama. Will Grandma recognize me?

Sure, when she sees those cheeks!

- What about my cheeks?

- Let's see.

That's for sure.

The bus from Tiro is here!

I'm the only one who could come.

I'm sick of being bounced about  
all day.

I've had enough.

Hello.

Are these two from the new husband?

Jonah.

Hey, are you going to help me,  
or just stand there looking lazy?

Chanda is always helping.

She's very good in school.

My back is killing me!

"My back is killing me!"

Cheeky! You're your mother's son!

Sarah is hiding. We have to find her.

How do we find her?

You have to know where to look.

I know all her hiding places.

I want to search too.

You're too little.

I have special eyes.

Nothing can hide from me.

You can scrub  
but that dirt won't come out.  
We'll see.  
Lillian is always cleaning.  
Ever since the day I put her up  
with her late husband...  
...it's always spotless.  
- You put them up?  
- Yes.  
Mrs. Tafa is a real friend.  
Remember when you rented  
this place, how we fixed it up?  
"God loves a cheerful giver."  
Those bracelets.  
How does she manage to wear them?  
And her skirt!  
It's so short,  
if she bends over, all the neighbors...  
...will see her panties!  
Don't you worry,  
I'm not wearing any panties.  
What did she say?  
This girl's always been a wild one!  
And you tell me  
she's Chanda's friend?  
She helps us, at least.  
Let me just tell you,  
watch out for this Esther.  
You feel sorry for her...  
...since her parents died,  
but if she isn't careful...  
...she'll meet a bad end like them.  
I hope she burned their sheets!  
Jonah.  
Lillian!  
Open up!  
Open up, woman!  
Let me in, you devil!  
Leave him.  
Open up.  
Auntie Ruth is here.  
Go watch the children.  
You poisoned Sarah.  
You're drunk!

You poisoned her with your milk.

Shut up!

You make me feel ashamed.

I'm sorry, Lillian.

Our little Sarah.

Papa!

My darlings.

- Papa loves you so much.

- Papa's not feeling well.

- He needs rest.

- Come play, Papa.

Go for a walk.

No!

Come home with me,

I have lots of candy.

Leave me alone!

Papa said you made Sarah sick.

- When?

- Just now, when he was yelling.

Sarah's on a trip. That's all.

Will you give us away too?

How could you think that?

You want us to go to Auntie Ruth's.

- Are you going to get rid of us?

- Not in your life.

So why can't we stay?

Papa is resting.

I promised Auntie Ruth

that you'd stay with her.

Just a few days.

Then you can come home.

Okay?

Come to your Auntie Ruth's.

I have plenty of nice things.

Ice cream, sweets,

everything you want.

"They who believe in me...

...believe in God...

...and will live for eternity."

I'll always be your friend, you know.

Even if people say bad things

about your family.

I'll always be your friend.

What would they say?

I don't know.  
But if that should happen...  
...and they say things  
about your family...  
...I'll still be your friend.  
Don't talk nonsense.  
It's bad luck.  
You'll stay my friend or what?  
Yes. I'll stay your friend.  
Your best friend.  
I knew you'd say that.  
We're friends for life.  
You won't let me down.  
I know that.  
Sorry about your little sister.  
Thank you, Sipho.  
Lillian...  
...you can sew for our church.  
We will support you...  
...and help you get through this.  
Thank you, Rose.  
Lillian...  
...I'm going to find work...  
...and look after you.  
Please, forgive me.  
Forgive me, Lillian.  
We're glad you came.  
I know my duty.  
Don't bother waiting with me.  
Your Sarah paid a terrible price.  
What?  
As you sow, so shall you reap, sister.  
The sins are visited on the children.  
Repent.  
What is it?  
What did she mean?  
Tell me.  
Why do they hate you?  
They'll never forgive me.  
They'd arranged for me  
to marry someone from Tiro.  
But your papa and I...  
...loved each other so much...  
...that we stood up...

...to our families.  
Your father was a good man.  
May he rest in peace.  
Jonah?  
Look who's here!  
What have you brought me?  
Superb!  
Your mother does the best work.  
How is she?  
She's been resting at the house...  
...since Sarah went away.  
She works hard.  
Good work should be rewarded.  
See you on Sunday.  
Where's Jonah?  
That idiot?  
I haven't seen him in months.  
Why are you wearing his jacket?  
Jonah owes me money.  
He gave it to me.  
I haven't seen him in ages.  
That's the truth, girl.  
I don't believe you!  
You shouldn't have washed  
Soly's sheets.  
You didn't see his face,  
so ashamed.  
It was nothing.  
From Mr. Pheto.  
He asked how you were.  
- More gossip.  
- No.  
He meant well.  
It hurts all over.  
It hurts all the time.  
Except when I look at you.  
I ran into Dudu.  
That good-for-nothing!  
She says Jonah is in Jo'burg.  
Away for three months  
without a word!  
- What are you doing?  
- He can go to hell.  
- What if he comes back?



- He's a liar!

Nothing but promises!

What are you doing  
with Papa's things?

- He asked for them.

- What for?

He's going to Jo'burg.

- When will he come back?

- I don't know.

I want Papa to come home. Now!

Iris!

- What are you doing?

- I'm playing with Sarah.

- What?

- Sarah lives here.

That's impossible.

Why?

Because she's an angel.

She doesn't want you playing here.

How would you know?

You and Mama don't love her  
anymore, not like me and Papa.

Jonah?

He'd be with us

if he loved us so much.

He loves Soly and me, not you.

You're jealous because  
he's not your father.

You'll be sorry when he comes home.

You should stay with us.

Esther is waiting for me.

You should see less of her.

I don't understand.

- I like Esther, she's nice...

- I don't care what people say.

Chanda, I don't think  
she's a suitable friend.

You understand?

I say this because I worry about you.

Worry?

Is this you talking, or her?

How dare you!

I saw her sell herself to truckers.

- That's a lie!

- It's God's truth!
- Chanda.
- Let her go, Lillian.
- Why don't you go in?
- They took my key.

You want to see my new room?

- You sleep here?
- They think I'm dirty.

They're crazy!

A good thing my sister and brothers  
are at our uncle's.

Otherwise they'd live like me.

Sorry your mother is sick.

Who says that?

Nobody. You miss school a lot.

Looking after a family is hard.

And I saw her with a cane.

Not a cane, a walking stick,  
to avoid stumbling at the cemetery.

You're my best friend.

- I do love you.
- What do you mean?
- She's very thin.
- She's fine!

You may be clever,  
but you can be so stupid.

- Talk like that is stupid!
- My parents said so too.
- So what?
- You think she's different?
- Will your aunt care for you?
- Shut up, Esther!
- It's just that...
- That's enough!

Forgive me. I'm sorry.

Esther, it's not...

Forgive me. I'm sorry, Esther.

Mama.

You still think about Papa?

It was hard, darling.

The family abandoned us.

You were already on the way.

I know you don't like Mrs. Tafa...

...but she was there

for your father and me.  
She helped us a lot.  
It's not her.  
It's you who worked so hard.  
I was naive, my darling.  
I was in love.  
A village girl.  
I didn't know what would happen...  
...if I disobeyed.  
I was courageous...  
...but I was too ignorant...  
...to manage...  
...to do what I wanted to do.  
But you, my darling...  
...you're smarter...  
...than I was.  
You amaze me.  
She's resting.  
- I have to speak to your mother.  
- She has a headache.  
When my Emmanuel was killed,  
I slept all the time.  
But life goes on.  
The headache will go away.  
Hello!  
- We are fine!  
- Fine.  
Tell her I have a plan.  
I won't budge until then!  
Tell her I have a plan.  
You're going to love Dr. Chilume.  
He's a genius.  
He has six degrees.  
They're hanging on the walls...  
...framed with gold seals  
and red ribbons.  
He can cure anything.  
Cancer, colitis, TB.  
He knows everything.  
This other thing too.  
He has a secret potion.  
I wonder if his potion  
can also cure farting.  
Do you remember?

My father built that.  
If he's so rich,  
it's because he's the best.  
So smarten up.  
Breathe. Again.  
Again.  
You're suffering from insomnia...  
...depression and rheumatism.  
Can you help me?  
Yes. I have all sorts of remedies.  
Before long,  
you'll be feeling better.  
And you'll quickly be back  
to your normal life.  
Doctor, how much will it cost?  
Six hundred rands.  
- I can't afford that.  
- You can't afford not to.  
Dr. Chilume,  
are these your degrees?  
Yes, indeed.  
All your medicine  
comes from Herbatex?  
You seem like a well-educated girl.  
That's true.  
She reads my mail to me.  
She's clever.  
Scholarship material.  
Should I read them to you?  
I think I can offer an alternative  
remedy for your mother.  
Doctor, will it be just as good?  
And cheaper?  
Chanda! How rude!  
No, it's okay.  
That I can guarantee.  
Your daughter's loyalty and  
intelligence really touch me.  
I've decided to give you  
a month's free treatment.  
You've got nerve interrupting  
the doctor like that.  
Is that how you raised her?  
Mrs. Tafa, she did well for us.

Lillian, the garments are so beautiful.

It's good to see you at church again.

- Lillian!

- You're looking good.

- I need money.

- Go back to school.

It's only 100 rands an hour.

No, go away. Get lost.

What are you looking at?

Go back to your hallelujahs.

Get lost.

What are you doing?

They all think I'm doing it anyway.

This way, I make money.

- You don't need to.

- What are you doing here?

Go away! We don't want kids here!

Go away!

She's right. Go home.

- I want to help you.

- You turned your back on me.

Come here, baby. Over here.

- I'm sorry.

- Yeah, sure.

Don't bother. Go home, I need to work.

Don't play with your food.

Sorry.

Finish eating.

Take me to the bedroom.

You're feverish.

You must go to the hospital.

- So the neighbors can gossip?

- No, because you need help.

I just need to rest...

...then I'll be fine.

It's nothing.

It's just a bruise.

Don't say that, Mama.

You should see a doctor.

A real doctor.

To examine you.

To be tested.

What, Chanda?

What are you saying?

Nothing.

I didn't say anything.

It's just that... Let me take you.

Please, Mama.

You worry too much.

That's enough.

I just need to rest.

- Is your mother here?

- She's lying down.

- I must talk to her.

- She's sleeping.

I've brought Jonah back.

- What?

- He was staying with us.

- He was with you?

- Yes, he seems to be going mad.

He's a drunk!

We don't have all day here!

- Go inside!

- Call your mama.

- Get out!

- I don't want to.

Get out, I tell you!

Kill me, but don't leave me here.

I'd rather die.

Get out!

Sorry, Chanda.

We can't keep him anymore.

Her milk killed my daughter.

My blood is good, my seed too.

You put a curse on me.

We have children.

Forgive me, brother.

Listen to me.

We'll find you a doctor.

A doctor?

I don't want your doctor.

You did this to me.

Dudu?

Is that you?

Help me.

I don't know you.

You're a dead man, a skeleton.

- I don't know you!

- But you and me...  
Shut up! Don't talk to me!  
Leave me alone! Shut up!  
Go back to your homes.  
Jonah, I'm sorry. Forgive me.  
You can stay here  
or come into the house.  
Either way, we'll bring you  
some water or clothing.  
I'm going to the hospital to get help.  
There is no help.  
Number 325, 325?  
- I need an ambulance!  
- Get in line!  
It's an emergency!  
Everybody has an emergency!  
Wait your turn!  
There's a man who was beaten up.  
He's under a cart.  
You have to bring him here.  
The doctors don't make house calls.  
If he is hurt, call the police.  
- Maybe they will bring him.  
- They won't.  
They won't touch him.  
They won't even get close to him.  
Nobody will.  
He's very thin.  
I think...  
I think he's got...  
Where is Jonah?  
He's gone.  
Is he dead?  
Did somebody  
do something to him?  
He left on his own.  
He wanted to go.  
Mrs. Tafa told me.  
An evil wind blows from the north,  
from a village.  
- Do we agree?  
- Yes, we agree.  
I see...  
I see a raven.

It's hopping on one foot.

Lillian's sister has a club foot.

She came to Sarah's funeral.

- Do we agree?

- Yes, we agree.

Death.

Death.

It took something from your home.

I see a demon in you.

I see a demon.

A demon in your body.

Go back to your village.

Cleanse yourself.

Someone took a part of you.

Go home if you want to be cured.

- Do we agree?

- Yes, we agree.

Thank you, Mrs. Gulubane.

Amazing. A miracle.

A miracle!

I must return to Tiro.

This house is bewitched.

- You can't believe that.

- I can't?

Then why did my baby die?

Why is my body so sore?

Why does my head ache?

Mama, stay.

Mrs. Tafa will help you  
with Soly and Iris.

- Don't go.

- I left money for the rent.

- And for food.

- Stay, Mama.

I have to go.

I'm doing it for you, Soly and Iris.

You know I'm right.

I must go.

How long does it take  
to break a spell?

As long as it takes

to recover what was taken from me.

Mrs. Gulubane said it would be quick.

Mrs. Gulubane knows everything.



That's right.  
She helped solve our problem.  
If the neighbors ask, what do you say?  
That everything's fine.  
I love you.  
Come back soon.  
Soly and Iris are here,  
they're eating mealie pap.  
Mama called.  
She called?  
- Did you speak to her?  
- No, I called her.  
Mama says everything's fine.  
Do you want some pap?  
Did she say when she'd call back?  
No, but don't worry,  
I'll give her your message.  
Thanks, but I need to speak to her.  
I don't know when she'll call back,  
but if you're home I'll call you.  
Don't look so sad.  
The Lesoles are having a party. Go.  
Don't worry, I'll take care of them.  
You don't want people to think  
you have problems.  
Your mother wouldn't want that.  
She wouldn't.  
Would she?  
I'm glad you came.  
- Is your mother still up north?  
- Yes.  
They want her to stay a while.  
- That's good news.  
- Your mother's lucky.  
Enjoy yourself.  
I like your smile.  
- Really?  
- Can I come study at your place?  
If you come, we won't study.  
Then maybe after exams?  
Chanda. Chanda!  
Chanda.  
Who's there?  
Esther.

Don't look at me.

- Come in.

- I can't.

- Your mother?

- Don't worry.

Mama's not here.

We have to get you to a hospital.

I've been.

The doctors were busy.

A nurse sewed me up.

They should've kept you.

They had no free beds.

To them I'm just a whore.

That's not true.

You're my friend. My best friend.

It was a BMW.

When I got in...

...they beat me.

Then one of them said...

...he had AIDS,

that he'd give it to me.

After that...

...I don't remember.

I woke up in a ditch.

How long were you there?

- Who found you?

- The police.

All they said was...

...that I was a whore,

that it served me right.

My little darlings!

You know what? Esther is here.

- Esther Macholo?

- Yes. She fell off her bike.

She's staying in Mama's room.

- Is this a joke?

- Esther has problems.

I bet she does.

I'd like to use your phone

to call the shop in Tiro to tell Mama.

- Don't upset her.

- I won't!

Hey, watch it!

We sent someone to your home.

They didn't find anyone.  
He's gone.  
I'm sorry. Really sorry.  
Don't apologize, child.  
You look troubled. What is it?  
I have a friend.  
I think maybe...  
...she might have...  
She might have AIDS.  
And also...  
...a friend's mother is sick.  
Very sick.  
Bring her in to be tested.  
If it turns out positive...  
...we'll put her on our list  
for treatment.  
- Is there a chance?  
- A chance?  
There's always a chance.  
I need to use your phone.  
Think your mother wants you...  
...living with that whore?  
- She'll understand.  
She'd want me to get her babies  
away from her.  
Like they took away Esther's family?  
I don't care if she sleeps in a pigsty!  
She's staying!  
- And Soly and Iris are too!  
- You think you're so smart?  
Satan is speaking  
through your mouth!  
Let me call my mother.  
She'll say if it's Satan or me!  
As long as that slut is in your house  
you won't speak to your mother!  
Then I'll buy my own phone.  
- With what?  
- I'll tell Mama everything you said.  
That I have to do what Esther does  
to buy my own phone.  
I'll tell everyone.  
One night with her,  
and look how you talk!

Jezebel!

Use the phone, and go to the devil!

See how far you get!

Mr. Kamwendo?

It's Chanda.

Yes.

May I speak to my mother?

Could you give her a message?

Ask her to call me back.

I need to speak to her.

Come home. Dinner's ready.

- Where's Iris?

- I left her there.

Iris! Iris!

Soly, you dummy,

you left without any candy.

Come here. Come when I call you.

I'll come when I want. Or not at all.

Stop that right now!

Do as you're told!

- Now, you listen to me.

- Leave me alone.

You're not my mother!

I want to stay with Papa! I hate you!

Come, sit down.

Look, give it your best shot.

You'll get a second chance.

- You're not at Mrs. Tafa's?

- She's busy.

- Seen Iris?

- She must be at Mrs. Tafa's.

- Soly says Mrs. Tafa is busy.

- And your exam?

What's the matter?

I've disappointed everyone.

Not me.

You'll get another chance.

I'm sure you'll pass.

Chanda! Chanda.

There's been an accident.

Come quick!

- Hello, ma'am.

- She's the girl's sister.

Apparently they all drank beer

and they fell into that hole.  
Jacob! What happened?  
Iris was leaning over the hole  
speaking to Sarah.  
Paulo wanted to see Sarah.  
They lowered him on a rope.  
And he fell in.  
Iris sent us to get help.  
Iris! Iris! Iris!  
Let them do their job.  
Chanda!  
Where are you going?  
What are you doing?  
I'm sorry, I'm sorry.  
I won't be bad again.  
I know. I know.  
We found him!  
You're alive, I was so frightened!  
Something cushioned his fall.  
Now move back, all of you.  
Why didn't Mama come?  
She wanted to say goodbye.  
Then why isn't she here?  
Maybe she didn't get the message.  
It's a crying shame.  
He was still so young.  
A horrible accident!  
Imagine falling into a hole like that?  
He never stood a chance!  
Mama should have been here.  
I don't see why.  
- She loved him.  
- That cheater?  
That useless drunk  
who put her to shame?  
His accident won't change anything.  
It was no accident.  
What do you mean?  
Jonah either fell or was pushed  
because he had AIDS.  
If you say that Jonah had the bug...  
...people will say  
your mama has it too.  
- They're already saying it.

- No one's saying it.  
- You sure?  
- They think your mother...  
...was bewitched...  
...and that Jonah had an accident.  
The truth.  
- It's not true.  
- It's what they think!  
That lie made my mother leave.  
- Your lies!  
- My lies?  
You convinced Mama to leave  
because you're scared of the bug.  
And scared of what folks will say.  
Why shouldn't we be?  
Your mother never meant  
to come home. She's gone for good!  
When I get home I'll pack my bags.  
I'm going to Tiro to fetch Mama.  
- I won't let you go.  
- Try stopping me!  
Fine, go ahead and break  
your mama's heart...  
...and your own while you're at it!  
Here's 500 rands.  
It was to bring back  
my brothers and sister.  
It's not enough. Take it.  
I can't take it.  
- Why? Because it's from whoring?  
- Of course not.  
You saved my life.  
If you hadn't taken me in, I'd be dead.  
Please.  
Mr. Kamwendo.  
I'm Chanda.  
Look at you.  
Last time I saw you, you were so high.  
How you've grown.  
I'm sorry to hear  
about your stepfather.  
- You came to see your grandmother?  
- No.  
I came to see Mama.

I called last week.  
I asked you to leave a message.  
- Is something wrong?  
- No, child.  
But she's not here.  
I passed your message on,  
but your Aunt Lizbet said...  
...your mother had left.  
- I don't understand.  
- Your grandma came...  
...and left a message for Mrs. Tafa.  
- Didn't you get it?  
- No.  
Your grandmother  
lives over that way.  
It's shorter  
if you cut through the fields.  
Thank you.  
Hello?  
It's Chanda.  
What are you doing here?  
- I came to see Mama.  
- She left.  
I called last week.  
Mr. Kamwendo told me she left.  
She didn't come home.  
Where is she?  
In Polokwane, with friends.  
Their car broke down.  
She'll be back when it's fixed.  
Maybe a week.  
How'd you find out? Did she call?  
Are you calling me a liar?  
Get in here!  
- Where's Mama?  
- Go home, she'll be back soon.  
I don't believe you.  
I'm going to the police!  
You're trouble. Like your mother.  
She defied God,  
she dishonored her family...  
...and now the ancestors  
have disowned her.  
- Is she dead?

- She has the disease.

Divine punishment.

It's no more punishment  
than your club foot.

What sin did you commit?

- It's God's wrath!

- What do you know?

Lizbet!

Enough.

That's enough.

She has the disease.

We kept her for a while.

But she's very sick.

We hid her where the illness  
won't harm the family.

She's always shamed the family,  
even in death.

Where is she?

Mama!

Mama!

Mama!

Don't worry, Mama.

I'm with you.

I'm with you.

Chanda.

I'm lost.

Don't worry. I've come to get you.

We're going home.

Mrs. Tafa.

How are you today?

Easy does it.

Thank you.

You're bringing us trouble.

You're bringing us trouble.

It's her fault.

The curse is that slut's fault!

You're bringing trouble to us all!

Welcome back.

I don't know what you're doing here.

I've come to greet my friend Lillian.

You have a problem with that?

I know what goes on

behind your doors.

This is the best family here.



If any of you disagree,  
I'd be happy to share your secrets.  
Lillian needs your prayers.  
Will you pray for her?  
We'll pray for her.  
We're glad you're back.  
It's true.  
May I see your mother?  
Forgive me.  
Your mother and I  
wanted to protect you from shame.  
- I know.  
- No.  
You don't know.  
I only thought of myself.  
Letting her die like that.  
People know we're friends.  
When the ambulance arrived...  
...I went and hid.  
I prayed.  
I prayed.  
But it was for my son.  
Why is that?  
My son wasn't killed in a robbery.  
He was so afraid  
people wouldn't love him anymore.  
That's just crazy.  
You think so?  
I dishonored his death with a lie.  
What a daughter you have.  
What a daughter.  
The gates are opening  
The gates are opening  
We come from suffering  
And we confessed our sins  
And they repented  
The gates of heaven are open