

Mugabe Western

by Ann Bogle

There were three officers in the hall, two white men and a black woman, in blue uniform. Maria opened the door, just as they were about to let themselves in, to save them the trouble and because she might have seemed guilty, standing just inside.

“We have a warrant for Mr. Western,” one of the men said.

Maria leaned against the door for support. She hadn't been awake long.

“Mugabe's not here,” she said.

“What's your name?”

If Maria had felt stronger or been closer to home, she might have told them that she had had nothing to do with it, but her rumpled clothing and loose pantyhose betrayed her.

“Maria Wentworth,” she said.

“Come with me, Maria,” the woman officer said. Then the men walked past her to search the apartment.

Outside the squad cars were parked sloppily at the curb. Two were steel gray, the color of pistols in westerns. The other had a siren mounted on top like a cherry on a sundae.

Neighbors watched from behind gauze curtains, bobbing their heads and pointing: What did that girl do? Then they pulled back from the window, as if watching itself might be illegal.

The officer got in the car after Maria. She cleared her throat to ask Maria a question.

“You can call your attorney from the station,” she said.

Maria didn't have an attorney or know how to find one from the station. She pretended that the car would never get there; it would go on and on, the sky flicking white and gray between buildings.

Maria wanted to believe, as she had the night before, that Mugabe was different from other people, different from David, her

other one-night stand. Mugabe would meet her for lunch as he had promised.

Mugabe was spiritual and colorful, and his laugh was bone-deep, even in her bones. If she were in trouble because of him, it impressed her less than the idea that she had challenged her fate. Her mother was set on her marrying a scholar, just because her mother had wanted to. It didn't matter which scholar Maria met, just that she met one and made faculty children.

Months before, she had met David at the office Christmas party. David was her boss's nephew, a student from Chicago on his way to London to study Middle English literature. He used cocaine and said in a wry, scholarly whine that all scholars use cocaine, a fact her mother probably did not know.

David picked the chair next to Maria's in the banquet room. She was someone else young to talk to. She was the youngest person in the office. David talked about scholars, and she listened, trying to be agreeable. She couldn't be self-sufficient all the time.

He had a long, skinny body that produced too much sweat during lovemaking. She asked him if he could move differently, so she could get out from under the dripping, but he didn't seem to hear her. She watched each drop form on his brow, jiggle, and drop, and imagined the drops settling on her, hardening into stalagmites, turning to ice in winter.

It wouldn't have mattered so much if other people hadn't made such a big deal about it. Mr. Kanter treated the two as a couple—even though David had moved. He gave her David's address in London and told her about his paper topics.

One day, while Mr. Kanter talked about David, and she was forced to think again of his tweed sport coat in a ball on her floor, and his black ribbed socks coiled around his ankles in her bed, and the dead, endless wetness of his skin, she said, "Mr. Kanter, David and I are not an item." The look on his face told her she had misspoken, so she added, "yet," as a fact of her conditioning.

When they got to the station, the officer brought Maria to an examination room. Along one whole wall of the room was a mirror. Maria sipped beef bouillon from a plastic green cup the warden had given her. She looked up at herself for reassurance, then down again, certain that someone was behind the mirror watching her.

The questioner's name was Mr. Lacey. He had a sore red face and dark spots on his forehead. On the shoulders of his coat were yellow flakes of skin, that she could not call dandruff, since he was bald. All in all he seemed to be decaying.

"Miss Wentworth," he said, "our men found you today at Mugabe Western's apartment. We have reason to believe that is not his real name. Do you know his name?"

"He said his name was Mugabe." She thought that if she responded factually and calmly, he would see that she had nothing to hide and let her go.

"How did you meet him?"

"It was last night, at a party at my friend's house."

"Did anyone else at the party know him?"

"I don't know."

"So you left the party and went to his house, knowing no one else who knew him personally. Is that true?"

A lawyer leaned close and advised her. There was a mole between his nose and upper lip. She watched it as if it were a tiny friend. The lawyer told her not to take offense at personal questions because they were routine. Mainly, they wanted to know about Mugabe.

"We talked together," she said. "He was kind to me and to everyone there."

There was a rumbling in the room behind the mirror. Mr. Lacey left in three giant strides, his shoes sticking noisily to the floor. The lawyer followed him in sleek leather shoes.

Maria remembered the calming effect of levitation from grade school slumber parties. She whispered, "Light as a feather, stiff as a board," continually, as she looked at the empty padded

folding chairs arranged at the long folding table. She put friends in the chairs—Georgia, Candace, Rosemary from home. She wanted her mother suddenly like a prisoner wants parole. She wanted her high school boyfriend and her tenth grade French teacher, who had said her accent was perfect. She wanted Mugabe, who was wanted for some reason.

On their way to the party the night before, her roommates, Georgia and Nathan, had walked almost a block behind her. They were more alone in their little cloud bubble than she was in her singleness. They were self-contained, two nymphs in a photo booth. Maria wanted something different—love to spread across her face like a wide smile, a certain grace. Sometimes she had found love like that at parties. It depended on how she dressed.

Before the party she had been reading in her room with the door locked, trying to think of something to wear. Her clothes were all limp and featureless. She had three pairs of high heels, two that Rosemary had given her in high school as a hint—a lavender pair that showed the cleavage of her toes and a black pair with star-shaped rhinestones. She never wore those outside, only in her room with the door locked.

Georgia and Nathan were wrestling in the living room. It felt like them against her. They liked her; they only didn't notice her. She noticed them, the way their cloud bubble bumped into her, how she could not be inside it with them but had to accommodate it not to pop it.

Georgia came to her door and said in her sweet Dutch accent, "Maria, are you going to the party? Nay-ton and I will be leaving in tur-ty minutes."

When Maria opened the door, they were eating her baby Swiss, feeding it chunk by chunk into each other's mouths. She waited in the doorway, wrapped in her robe, for something comfortable to be said, some gesture that would allow her to walk through the middle of their love to the bathroom.

Certainly they had noticed the change in her. She used to wear purple. She used to participate. Now she went to work, and read in high heels, as if someone in particular were coming.

When they giggled, she walked to the bathroom.

"There's another party tonight," Nathan said, standing to kiss her cheek. He always kissed everyone on the cheek, and it never seemed natural. It always seemed like he would rather be from Europe than from Dubuque. He was wearing fuchsia tennis shoes and a woven vest that Georgia had brought from Ecuador. He was becoming an architect.

"It's a party for pre-awk," Georgia said. "You come, too. It will be very wonderful." Georgia studied anthropology.

"I'll see," she said. "It's Candace's last party before she goes to Boston."

Georgia looked shorter than usual in her velvet mini-dress. She called the color of it "midnight," as if she had culled all her fashion knowledge from the pages of American *Vogue*. She wore black army boots and beaded earrings that dripped like chandeliers to her shoulders. Maria had nothing like it to wear.

After her shower, she put on a red t-shirt and blue jeans, cinched tightly with a calfskin belt. Her cowboy boots were real, the same ones she had worn in horse shows in high school. There were petrified clumps of dung and mud on the soles. She looked in the mirror. It was dismal.

Georgia dipped in to tell her they were leaving. Her earrings tinkled.

"I look like a cowgirl," Maria said.

"No, you don't. You're fine."

"Definitely no," she said, shedding her clothes. She put on a paisley wool skirt that looked like polyester, a white blouse, and textured pantyhose. She left the house, still belting her coat around her.

The lawyer told her that certain security experts would need to talk to her, but the FBI and CIA were subject to state and local jurisdiction. There was red tape.

"You have to stay a while longer," he said. "You can use the phone, let people know where you are."

"What do the FBI and CIA have to do with it?"

"It's a question of security," he said. "Mugabe Western fled his country for political reasons. We're checking his reading behavior, visits to people at odd hours, and his role in anti-apartheid demonstrations."

"What do you mean, 'reading behavior'?"

"The FBI can use library records, but it's harder to do now. They need court orders. It takes days sometimes."

Maria had been the first to arrive at Candace's party. She helped her put food out on the kitchen table and laid spoons for soup in a fan design around the large bowl.

Candace found a big crystal dish for the oyster crackers she had brought. Later, she told people who had brought wine to the party, that she had remembered the oyster crackers.

She avoided the kitchen because so many men were there huddled around the beer keg, and so many women were chewing silently on pretzels, while they nodded and pretended to listen to people. One woman went into the bathroom off the kitchen and threw up, while she ran water into the tub. Everyone in the kitchen could hear her doing both things.

Except for Georgia and Nathan, the people at the party were Candace's friends. Maria felt like the armpits of a nurse's blouse. She had dressed too austere.

Candace wore a lace curtain and a peach bodysuit underneath. She didn't have a boyfriend. She had suitors, but the men didn't seem to notice each other; they only noticed her.

Mugabe and his friends came late to the party. They were brooding and separate. One of them talked about nuclear war; one

had long hair and holes in his earlobes; another rolled cigarettes and watched the women as they darted by him.

The only place to sit alone was in Candace's room. Maria went there and took her shoes off.

When Mugabe came in, he turned on the light. She had stood up and was leaning against the wall by the bed.

"Hello," he said, impressively, kindly.

"Hello," she managed. It was a classic line. She wanted to say, "Bellow, below, jello."

Very carefully and tactfully, she pushed the small of her back against the wall. In this position her pelvis had a shape, an existence as obvious as a roll of Scotch tape. She had read in a stretching magazine that good posture could be learned by flattening the back against a firm surface—a wall, the floor, a hard bed. It was a way to feel what good posture felt like without actually having good posture. Each hub of her backbone touched the wall. She grew taller.

"What are you doing?"

The magazine had said you could do this anywhere—even on your secretarial job—without being detected.

"Nothing," she said. "I stretch my back out this way when it's stiff."

"I'm Mu-ga-be," he said slowly, giving her a chance to memorize it.

"Do you want to sit down?" she said. She sat down on the bed, and he sat next to her without touching her.

At first she thought he was expecting something, but when she looked at him, he seemed merely thoughtful. She loved his face, or considered loving it. This took several minutes. He had dark monastic eyes. She imagined him watching jack rabbits spring to life, zebras explode when lions were running. His skin was dark and smooth. She thought fleetingly of skin and color, and of people who were slow of color risking suntans.

"What are you thinking?" Mugabe said.

“Nothing,” she said and let the silence come again like a warm blanket. She was tugging at a past carcass that held her firmly to her side of the bed, cautioned and remote.

“I would,” she said suddenly.

Then Mugabe touched her back, and she gave way. She stared at the upturned palm of his hand and told him things she had never told anyone. It might have been naive to attribute him with wisdom, just because he was from Uganda or somewhere, but she wasn't thinking of that then.

Mr. Lacey released her after two, too late to meet Mugabe at the diner, but she went there anyway, hoping he would be there and know everything already, so she wouldn't have to speak. She was thinking that he must be a leader, of his friends, or of something larger, some faction that lived underground and heard every nuance of speech, every rustle and movement of a predator above.

The diner was empty except for a waitress wiping off tables and a man at the counter eating behind a paper.

She decided not to ask whether someone like him had been there and gone and that from then on he would be Mr. Western to her.

Maria returned to work on Monday morning, wearing her tan work Candies, glad to be employed.

“What *were* you reading?” Mr. Kanter asked her aloud, *apropos* of his unique communication style, as she arranged her feet in their tall heels under her desk. She let it slide like a seed in childhood.

