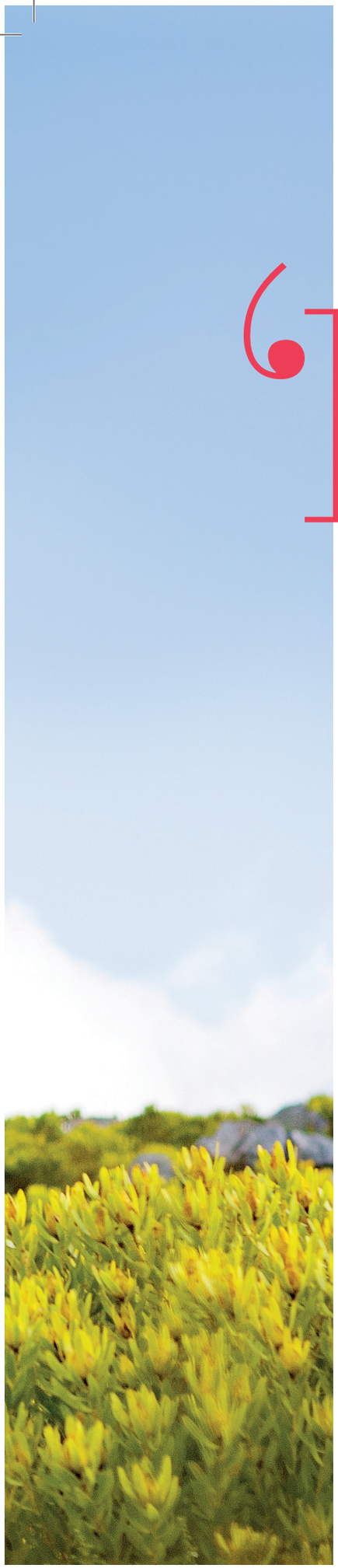
DEADLY & DELICIOUS!

Tannie Maria may not be Sherlock Holmes, but could he bake buttermilk poppyseed rusks, dish out advice and solve a murder all before breakfast? I think not. The delightful agony aunt/detective is back, sharing recipes and solving a murder (or two) in Sally Andrew's latest cosy mystery, *Death on the Limpopo*.

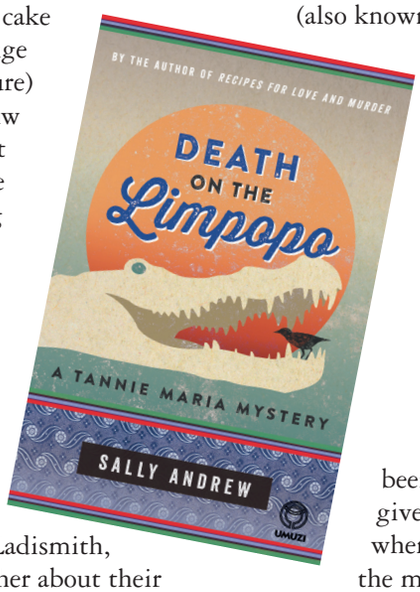
BY **CHARIS TORRANCE**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **LIZA VAN DEVENTER**



Killing it in the Karoo



'Life is too short not to wear ballgowns, but it's too long to walk around in uncomfortable shoes,' says Sally Andrew with a laugh as she shows me her red *veldskoene*. She's not kidding: she owns even more ballgowns than pairs of *vellies*. The author of the bestselling Tannie Maria mysteries – *Recipes for Love and Murder* and *Tannie Maria & the Satanic Mechanic* – has left her mud brick house in the Karoo behind to promote the third instalment in the series, *Death on the Limpopo*. We're sitting in a kitchen with tea and cake – a granadilla and orange delight (see main picture) made by Verushka Louw that Sally is testing out for book four – because whether you're reading or just discussing Tannie Maria, it's always best done over something sweet.



Fifty-something, short and soft, Tannie Maria is the former food writer, now agony aunt at the *Klein Karoo Gazette* in Ladismith, where people write to her about their problems and she gives them a recipe that will help, with some advice on the side. When Tannie Maria isn't solving problems with food, she's solving a murder or two, all the while trying to navigate her complicated relationship with Detective Henk Kannemeyer.

'People often ask me where I get my ideas and, to echo Agatha Christie, I always reply, "The Spar – they have an Idea Special every second Tuesday,"' jokes Sally. But in all seriousness, the idea for Tannie Maria came to Sally while sitting under a camel thorn tree in Namibia after having a close shave with a leopard in a cave (as one does). It's a tradition that stuck: being in nature... not escaping leopards. 'Whenever I write a new book, I go deep into the wilderness,' she says. Her partner of the past 20 years, wildlife artist Bowen Boshier, also loves the bush and they head out into the wild whenever they need to get away from it all. In fact, the outline for *Death on the Limpopo* was written on Coetzer's Island near the Mapungubwe National Park, where the final events of the book take place.

Yet, while nature inspires her, it was actually her myalgic encephalomyelitis (also known as ME or chronic fatigue syndrome) that pushed Sally to initially put pen to paper. 'If I hadn't been so ill, I wouldn't have given myself permission to live where I wanted to live, be with the man I wanted to be with and do what I really wanted to do.' For Sally, writing has always been an act of healing. 'I spent nearly 20 years in bed, and this is what I needed to get me out of that.'

Tannie Maria came to Sally while sitting under a camel thorn tree in Namibia after having a close shave with a leopard in a cave.

Since the success of her first book in the series, (Alexander McCall Smith called it 'a vivid, amusing and immensely enjoyable read' and 'a triumph'), the rights have been bought by 24 publishers and it has been translated into 14 different languages. 'My literary agent, Isobel Dixon (who represents writers such as Deon Meyer and Finuala Dowling), took me on just before the Frankfurt Book Fair, and made a deal quite quickly with





publishers HarperCollins and Canongate,' Sally recalls. 'She said she had never seen so much love and enthusiasm bubble up so quickly about a book. I felt like the Cinderella of the ball.'

Sally is as surprised as anyone that a half-English, half-Afrikaans *tannie* from the Karoo resonated with so many around the world. 'There's always a mystery in what works and what doesn't.' Perhaps people simply need a good, cosy mystery in their lives. 'We have enough heavy stuff in the news,' says Sally. 'I want us to have a chance to heal.'

Despite her early success, Sally wasn't always sure there would be a second book. 'It was so much to keep up with. I was on the phone interviewing publishers in New York at midnight. Don't get me wrong: I quite enjoyed being a rock star, but I'm happy to be under my rock in the Karoo 99 percent of the time.' Her illness had also pushed her to the brink. The turning point came during a trip to Zambia, where she'd spent the early years of her life. 'My parents visited the house we used to live in, but I got so sick I didn't go with them. On the way back I was weeping. I was in a wheelchair because I couldn't walk and I thought: "I'm going to have to give it all up."' But she knew this wasn't how she wanted Tannie Maria's story to end.

To get back on track, Sally went on a journey of healing, doing everything from 17 days of fasting to flying to London to do a Lightning Process course. '[The course] really turned things around for me both physically and psychologically: it's about changing your neural pathways to get out of the fight-or-flight reaction, which a lot of diseases related to the immune system are affected by.'

In Tannie Maria's latest adventure, she meets Zabanguni 'Zaba' Kani, an investigative

Sally's best BOOKS

- *Right now I'm reading* Prooi *by Deon Meyer.*
- *My favourite authors are Agatha Christie, Barbara Kingsolver, Herman Charles Bosman and Jeanette Winterson.*
- *The fictional character that really resonated with me has to be Peter O'Donnell's Modesty Blaise. She's one of the original kick-ass heroines, employing spiritual and martial-arts tricks to get out of very tough situations, and* skop *those bad guys to* doer-*and-gone.*
- *I grew up reading* Just So Stories, Winnie-the-Pooh *and* Mary Poppins. *I suspect these books have all played a role in the creation of the Tannie Maria characters.*

Top 5 quotes from *Death on the Limpopo*

Hattie wiped her desk with a tissue, although it looked quite clean to me. Maybe that's the way to do it: make the dust know you'll fight it hard, and then it won't bother to settle in the first place.

Zaba turned on the *bakkie* heater, which sounded like a wheezy dog, and was not much warmer, but it kept my feet from freezing.

'No signal,' Zaba said. 'The Karoo really is the middle of nowhere.'

'For you, maybe,' I said. 'For me, it's home.'

I stood up and tried to hug them both, but my arms weren't long enough. So I made us all some more coffee.

'He threatened to kill us, too,' said Zaba. 'Feed us to the crocodiles.' Bingo shook his head and said, 'It is better that crocodiles eat fish.'

journalist with a penchant for black leather and justice. A series of events unfolds and she leaves the safety of her stoep in the Klein Karoo for the Limpopo River, where she and Zaba have to escape not one but two assassins. But at least she has her old faithful blue *bakkie*, a new pair of *veldskoene* and delicious *padkos* for the journey.

As someone who is not at all a foodie, Sally admits that the recipes in the books are not her forte. Each recipe featured in her work is tested by a professional – this time, by the siblings behind the Cakebread Food Studio in Cape Town, Mari-Louis Guy and Callie Maritz – and Sally holds plenty of food tasting parties. 'The recipes need to have something real in the flavour and some tradition, but most importantly they need to be moan-out-loud delicious.'

Her third book is more of a political thriller than a small-town murder mystery, and something of a love letter to SA journalism. (You won't miss the parallels between the corrupt officials in the book and a few scandals we've read about in real life.) In her acknowledgements, Sally writes: 'I had to tone down much of the crazy reality to make it believable in my novel.'

Death in Limpopo was also a bittersweet project for Sally. In it, we learn more about Tannie Maria's late father, who was an underground member of the ANC during apartheid. The book was strongly influenced by Sally's own father, Paul. 'He helped me with the research – pointing me in the direction of books and articles to read – and when he was on his sickbed, I read the manuscript to him.' When her father passed away, she had to work on the book without him. 'There was a bit of sadness when I finished it, because it was like I'd lost that link to him.' His death threw Sally off so much that for her fourth book she's toyed with bringing Tannie Maria's father back. 'I couldn't distinguish what was right for Tannie Maria and what were my own needs; I might still come back to that, but even talking about it now makes me sad. It's my way of trying to get my father back.'

Like Sally, Tannie Maria has gone through quite a transformation since the first novel. Sally has come to understand that her main character's obsession with food may not be as light-hearted as we thought. 'It was something I introduced as a humorous element and it has become clear to me that it's linked to her own trauma.' The second book centres on Tannie Maria's PTSD – from the years of abuse she suffered at the hands of her late husband, Fanie. 'I'm seeing how overeating is related to that stress. I've been looking more at Overeaters Anonymous groups, listening to podcasts about it and trying to get to grips with it.' In book four, Sally says, it will become more of a crisis for Tannie Maria. 'On some level, I feel a responsibility to help heal her and others who are going through the same disorder. It may seem egotistical to talk about your own characters in this way, but to me, they almost feel real. Although I've thought the plot out beforehand, what they say and the interactions they have is always a surprise to me.'

So what does the future hold for our heroine? 'In book four I give her and Henk an even harder time!' she says. 'Maybe in book five they'll be in a good place in their relationship but for now, they're struggling.' The untitled book is set to revolve around an antique store where vintage movies are shown. We're guessing there will be a chalk outline on the floor at some point…

TURN THE PAGE FOR A TASTER OF *DEATH ON THE LIMPOPO* →

DEATH ON THE LIMPOPO

BY SALLY ANDREW
(Umuzi, 2019, about R260)

CHAPTER ONE

It was a cold winter's evening in the Klein Karoo. Henk was working, and I was in bed early, in my pink flannel nightie, reading Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*. The book my father used to read to me when I couldn't sleep. My favourite story was 'The Elephant's Child'. My dad said that I had the curiosity, the insatiable curiosity, of the young elephant that just had to know what the crocodile ate for dinner. The kind of curiosity that can get you into trouble. It almost killed the elephant, and it nearly killed me.

I put the book down on my bedside table, but held onto the bookmark: a postcard, torn apart and stuck back together. My ma would tear Dad's cards in half and throw them away. This one I'd found and fixed with sticky tape. Years later, when the tape yellowed and peeled off, I stuck it together again. It was the last card I ever got from him. It showed some trees on the banks of the Limpopo River.

I turned over the postcard and read the words again:

Well, here it is: the great grey-green greasy Limpopo all set about with fever trees. Though it's more brown than green wouldn't you say? That skinny yellow tree is a fever tree and the fat ones are baobab trees. And there are crocodiles and elephants, and it looks much the same now as it did in Kipling's day. Missing you, my Maria-Belle. I will bring you up here one day.

My fingers ached; I was holding onto the card too tightly. I missed my father.

I slipped the postcard between the pages of the *Just So Stories* and got out of bed. I put on my pale-blue dressing gown and sheepskin slippers, and added a log to the Aga stove that stood against a wall in my kitchen-dining-living room. On top of the big cast-iron stove, an oxtail stew gently bubbled, and rusks were drying out in the oven. My mother's muesli buttermilk beskuit.

I'd got so much from my mother, perhaps too much. And a lot less from my father. My dad's hair was thick and reddish, as were his beard and moustache. He kept both short; they got out of hand when he let them grow. He had long, strong, wiry legs and arms, high cheekbones, and a big nose. I had none of those. I'd got my ma's body – short and plump, with curly brown hair. But I did have my dad's green eyes, which might have helped me to see the world as he saw it. Although maybe I never got the full picture, because my mother was always closing the curtains.

I'd had too little time with my dad, but my ma had filled my life in a way that there was hardly any air left for me. She may even have been the reason I married early, to the wrong kind of man. Of course, I can't blame her for what Fanie did. Though I wish she hadn't told me to 'stand by my man', when she knew what he was doing to me.

But I did get many good things from my ma. Underneath her fears, and her closed-curtain beliefs, she was loving and kind and strong. And she left me real things, things I can hold. The rocking chair by the fire, the Tupperwares and tins I still use, and, of course, all her wonderful recipes.

An owl called. Hoo-hoohoo. The soft sound of a Karoo night.

I made myself a cup of hot cocoa the way my ma had taught me, with milk and a pinch of salt.

'Mmm,' I said to the cocoa, after I'd taken a sip. 'Thank you.' It felt like a comforting friend.

Since Henk's been in my life, I don't talk so much to my food. It's not right to neglect your friends just because you have a boyfriend, but luckily food is very forgiving and enjoys company even more than conversation.

I sat down in an armchair by the black stove and took in its gentle heat. Henk thinks I should get a modern fireplace so we can watch the flames, but I like the way the Aga can cook food and boil water, and bake, while it warms the house.

The phone rang. It was Henk.

'Maria. I just called to say goodnight.'

I don't know how I got myself a man like Henk. At my age. He's a big man, with a chestnut moustache, silver hairs on his chest, and warm hands. And a smile that makes my heart leap like a springbok.

'You still at work?' I asked. Lieutenant Henk Kannemeyer is a detective with the Ladismith police.

'Ja. What you up to?'

'I'm sitting by the fire in my nightie, drinking hot chocolate.'

'Yum.' From the way he said it, he was talking more about me in my nightie than the hot drink in my hand.

'I made oxtail stew,' I said. 'Want to come round tomorrow night?'

'Yes. Lekker. Goodnight, my bokkie.'

His little buck, that's what he calls me. Though I'm not so little.

'I love you,' he said.

'Goodnight, Henk.'

I loved Henk, but it felt like something inside me might break

PHOTOGRAPHS: LIZA VAN DEVENTER, ANDREA NIXON; BALLGOWN BY MYSTIC ROSE; CAKE MADE BY VERUSHKA LOUW; *VELDSKOENE*: CHUCKINS, MUIZENBERG MARKET

if I said the words out loud.

Henk's voice added to the warm feeling I got from the stove and the hot chocolate. But I still had a cold space in my belly from missing my father. Even before he left my ma, he was away a lot, travelling. Dad was English-speaking, and reported on Africa for *The Guardian* newspaper. He wanted a divorce, but Ma refused. I'm not sure if it was because she loved him, or because in those days, a Christian Afrikaans woman just did not get divorced. It wasn't all that different in my day. The same ideas get passed on from mother to daughter, along with the recipe books.

My dad moved out, and spent more time away from South Africa. He visited us less and less. Eventually he served my ma with divorce papers. She threw them on the fire and said she'd rather be a widow than a divorcee. And he let her be.

After those divorce papers, my ma got rid of everything that belonged to my dad. Apart from me. So, when I was 18 and she got that phone call about his death, there was nothing left of his in the house. No piece of him for me to hold onto. Apart from a few postcards that I'd hidden away.

Dad was an only child, like me. His parents were dead, and my ma didn't arrange a funeral. She told me he'd died in an accident and been cremated, but she couldn't – or wouldn't – tell me where his ashes were.

Ma was bitter that he'd left. But she was also angry that he'd died working 'with the blacks' as an African National Congress 'terrorist'. The man who'd phoned her called Dad 'comrade', and she could hear he was a black man.

It was only years later that Ma told me Dad was an underground member of the ANC, which might explain some of the arguments.

I'm not one to stay in the shadows of the past, if I can help it. Even those years of abuse with Fanie that used to sit so darkly in my heart have almost disappeared in the soft sunshine of Henk's love. But I'm telling this story about my father and how I longed for a bigger piece of him because I want to explain, to myself maybe, why it was that I went with a tall, dark stranger down a road filled with danger. To the place where the crocodile has its dinner. ✤

But I did get many good things from my ma. Underneath her fears, and her closed-curtain beliefs, she was loving and kind and strong.

