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King of Bums

The lecture room is packed tight.

"I want to warn you," the Minister says in a dragging voice. "Never ever make the mistake of looking down on us. We freed this country," he points at us. "We freed you, and now you think we are stupid."

My hand shoots up, and the chair, almost reluctantly, points at me. I know he does not like me, or should I say my liberated mouth, which is quite famous around the university. The remote control mic is passed over to me by an usher.

"Your worship," I begin to a hushed room. Black and white heads are twisted back at me from the chairs, as I am standing at the back of the room, just by the door. "What pains me the most about war veterans is that they seem to think that, since they freed the country, now we, who did not go to the war, owe them our lives." The chair is scowling at me, and the white-haired Minister's teeth are bared in a fixed smile. "They fail to grasp that, given the chance, if we had been old enough at that time also, we could have done what they did too, and just as good."

The usher reaches for the mic, but I brush his hand away. I continue. "We ask them to also respect us, as we respect them, by not continuously reminding us of the war—that is history now. Instead, we should be looking forward, seeking ways we can unite the diverse peoples that make up this country, and, most importantly, how we are going to save the once bread basket of Africa from becoming the basket case it has been reduced to now because of political incompetence."

The usher's hand darts in from below and snatches the mic away.

I remember their colorful return from the bundu. I was still very young then, at that tender age where kids take delight in tailing amorous couples into the bushes behind the township for a free porno, or peep through chinks in curtains in lodgers' bedroom windows at night.

I remember the women the most. *Wena!*

A gramophone was set on a chair outside a house behind our line, belting intoxicating rumba, and these two women, in guerrilla camouflage, were, of all things, screwing the air in time to it, and all so beautifully done!

That dance, called *skokocha*, and imported from foreign Freedom Fighter camps, was pregnant with meaning. It promised the birth of new and exciting things for the country. It augured riches for us poor township dwellers who lived in crowded houses with no electricity, shared communal water taps and crapped in smelly pit-latrines where, if one dared peeped down the pit, you could see the fat maggots wriggling in the shit.

But seen from this lofty thirty four that I possess today, it also promised a later screwing of the masses by politicians who said do this with one hand, whilst they did that with the other—just like shameless itinerant magicians.

Life was one hell of a big adventure then. *Toyi toying* under the silver stars at night around the townships with the victorious guerrillas, openly insulting whites with no threat of youth militia bombing the shit out of us, no riot police tear gassing us, no cell doors clanging shut on us, no secret police tailing us—even no censorship. We were one big jubilant family, so it appeared to me.

Amidst all this euphoria, for the first time, the store was robbed.

I was skipping along the street that autumn afternoon, feeling half guilty and half happy with myself. I had just nicked a tickey from home, and I was going to buy a sherbet from the store. If mama discovered the theft, well, there were three of us boys at home to suffer for it, even if the others were not going to see the sherbet. And as I was the youngest, I also knew that my punishment was not going to be as severe as with the others—sometimes I had also been beaten by mama for pennies I had not stolen; so what the hell!

Halfway to the shops, a man flew from around a corner, running hard and carrying a briefcase. It was the storekeeper! Two men in rice camouflage were chasing after him, one wielding a hammer, and the other, a long bladed knife. Strangely, as is the habit of the township, no cheering

onlookers followed this chase. I had watched them disappear around another corner.

That evening, I heard father telling mother when he tottered in from the beer garden that the store had been robbed by "them."

Other robberies followed, and the guerrillas assumed another exciting aura for me. At that time I was reading Robin Hood, and I liked to liken them to him. Robbing from the rich and giving to the poor. For hadn't they taken the country from the rich colonial regime and given it back to us? I also visualized them taking from the storekeeper and giving to us, for then, being rich was being a storekeeper, and the storekeeper never gave anything away for free. Instead, he sold, and those without money went hungry. Being a teacher was regarded as rich too then, not this farce of today where grossly underpaid and nearly destitute teachers borrow money from their students to try to make ends meet.

I loved to listen to mother and father talking in bed after the candle had been blown out at night. It was fluent talk that solidified the world and life for me, and often transported me to far-away lands, to magical places in the rural areas where they had grown up and met. They made revelations to me about who were witches amongst our relatives and neighbors. They also talked about politics, and I now doubt if they understood it, no matter how eloquently they seemed to express their opinions, for they were both illiterate. And come to think of it, as close as I slept next to their bed, I never heard them fornicating, not even once. I remember one day asking mother where she had got a baby she came back carrying after a few days absence from home—she had said she had bought it at the store.

Then Takemore, a neighbor's son, came back from the war after a four-year absence. He became an instant hero to us kids.

In the evenings after supper, we would sit in a ditch on one side of the street, and he would fill us with awe inspiring stories about his bundu days that made me rue why I had not been born earlier so as to also have crossed to the guerrilla camps. One such story was how one day he had been hiding in a cave from white soldiers that had been chasing his platoon, and a

big snake had slithered over him, and he had lain still until it had gone away.

"I spat at it and it died," he had told us, much to our amazement. "If I had let it go, it would have given away our position on the skin of the earth."

Takemore never associated with any adults, although he was adult himself and had a beard and pubic hair. I saw it through the legs of his shorts one day when he had been squatting on the ground as he made a wheel for my toy wire car, because he wore no panties—and he had such big balls! Always he was surrounded by us. He taught us press-ups, which he said he had learnt overseas. There was one press-up which we could not perform, the two-finger one.

"Even your fathers and mothers can't do this one," he used to boast. "Only a person who has flown in a Russian plane and slept with a white prostitute can."

He also taught us how to draw an AK-47 rifle in the dust, and then to make a wire model of it. There was one gun he talked the most about, which he said could shoot down even the sky if correctly aimed. He said it was so big that it needed four men to carry it—but he could carry it alone—and when it shot—*Heyi wena! Basop!*

"If you want to bring down the sky, shoot the sun," he told us. "But nobody can hit it, it's so difficult because it is far away, even *ntikoloshis* fail to reach it."

Then one day he told us he would be leaving the township very soon.

"I was promised a house in the suburbs by the Commander whilst I was in the bundu," he told us in the ditch. He had just smoked *mbanje*, something that I feared so much, even its smoke, because I had heard it said it could make one go crazy in the head and be taken to the asylum. "The white owners will be moving away soon. I also wanted the wife, but the commander said no, we must leave the women alone, because war has rules and you just don't do things that the rule book says no to, just like Idi."

"Who is Idi?" I had asked him.

"A black man who fucked Indian arses," he had replied, stubbing the joint, then lighting a cigarette. "He drank human blood to get an erection

for it." There were eight of us kids in the intimacy of the ditch, all boys. Takemore had passed the cigarette to me.

"Smoke," he had said. "Let's enjoy what the skin of the earth has to offer to comrades." I was eight then.

I had taken a pull, and passed the cigarette on. Finally it had gone back to Takemore again, and he had laughed as eight kids coughed a lot around him.

Then Gasa, who lodged in the house behind ours, had walked past in the darkness.

"White boy!" Takemore had called to him. Gasa had leapt at him. They had fought savagely, and people had come out of houses from the sound of the battle to watch, and they eventually separated them.

I heard father later saying to mother from bed as we slept: "The gorilla wanted to kill the Selous Scout." That's how father pronounced guerrilla. But still, this pronunciation added to the allure of the guerrillas in my eyes, for I could now see a romantic figure clad in camouflage and armed with an AK-47 leaping from tree to tree in the jungle, helicopters chasing above, and colonial soldiers below.

Whilst Takemore had disappeared before Independence, we had seen Gasa time and time again coming home dressed in regime army camouflage, and sometimes delivered in an army truck. I remember too one day, just before the ceasefire, when a haggard Gasa had appeared from the bushes behind the township carrying a rifle, which I was to learn later had been an FN, and his uniform streaked with mud. He had stayed in his house without coming out for two whole days. We had been waiting hopefully for him to come out, for he usually gave us delicious tinned food when he came from work, especially me as he sometimes sent me to call various girls around the township for him whenever his wife was away in the reserves.

On the third night, he had come out, bought a mug of *amasese* from the beer garden and drank it with father in our house. Whilst lying under the bed with my brothers, where we liked to play when there were visitors, also with the hope of hearing something juicy, I heard Gasa telling father that he had been involved in a firefight with terrorists.

"Don't tell me!" Father had exclaimed.

"I am the only one who managed to escape," Gasa had replied. "I ran through the bundu for three days, and my first stop was here."

The following day, he had gone away wearing his uniform, and carrying his rifle.

Then one sunset, just after Independence, father came back home looking glum. He had not spoken to anyone, just took his chair and sat under the lemon tree, smoking cigarette after cigarette. We had steered clear from him, for we were well familiar with this mood. Even mother avoided him too. When darkness came, he was still sitting out there, and if one peeped out of the door, a tiny orange light could be seen under the lemon tree as he continued to smoke away what ever was bothering him.

Then later, sleeping, I had heard him tell mother, "My whites have gone."

"*Hayi Ah!*"

"No more work for me."

"*Mayibabo!* Is this our dependence?" That is how she pronounced Independence. "No more jobs for our husbands?"

Up to that day, father had worked as a garden boy in a house in the suburbs, and he called his employers *amakhiwa ami* (my whites).

I remember them letting father push their baby boy in a pram along Moffat Avenue, whilst I ran happily along behind. I remember father scuttling on his hands and knees on the lawn of their front garden with this baby on his back, which was carrying a stick, now and then hitting father on the buttocks with it and crying—"Girrup!" or something like that. This was such a happy picture for me . . .

Back home, I had asked father if we could show mother the "Girrup!" stunt he had performed with his employer's baby, and I had received such a painful slap for my trouble.

Sometimes father brought us lovely toys from work. All of the toys were broken one way or the other, but as they say, half a loaf is better than nothing—kids came from far and wide in the township to play with the

toys, elevating us to the status of celebrities. Then father started bringing us new ones. Beautiful little cars that you could wind up, place on the concrete floor, and they would zoom away on their own. Battery-operated electric trains that, with a click of a switch, could transverse a miniature railway line, taking one on imaginary trips around the universe.

Then, one day, a man whom I recognized as working next door to father's whites came running home, his face covered in sweat. In a breathless voice, he had talked to mother, and mother had hastily taken all the new toys to the house neighboring ours. The man had gone away. Barely a few minutes later, a police Jeep had stopped in front of our house. Two black policemen, with father and the wife of his employer, Mrs. Almstead, had come out of the Jeep and entered the house. I had followed them in. One of the policemen was tall, and the other fat and short. The policemen had searched the room, and collected all the broken toys on the bed—we had no table. Then the tall policeman had said something to the Madame in English—she had shaken her head, negative, then she and the policemen had smiled at a relieved looking father.

"The new ones are next door!" I had cried out in Ndebele, wanting to assist, thinking they had come to admire the toys.

"Shut up!" The fat policeman had snapped at me in the same language, but he had been smiling, and he had stroked my cheek.

The tall policeman had asked the fat policeman something in Shona, his eyes, looking sharp, fixed on me. I did not understand Shona.

The fat policeman had lifted me in his arms, smiled at the tall policeman, and replied to him in Shona.

Mother had taken me from the policeman's hands and carried me outside, but not before I had noticed the murderous stare father had directed at me.

"If you say anything to those policemen, I will beat you!" she had said to me outside the house, in front of the lean-to where she cooked our meals. "You are lucky the tall one does not understand Ndebele!"

I had sensed that I had said something very wrong.

Later, the group had emerged from the house, all smiling at each other, father and Mrs. Almstead included, and they had all gone away.

"They personally told me they cannot be ruled by a Kaffir," I heard father saying from the bed, the darkness in the room solid and threatening to sit on me and squash me flat to the floor. I was quizzing myself how, for several times we had bought chips from cafés in town—how could cafés rule people?

"They said that?" Mother's voice had been shocked. "Then let them go with their jobs! We don't need them that much!"

As the country had celebrated its new-found independence, we celebrated our new-found poverty. A now unemployed father became the township drunk, whilst mother, brave woman, went to the recently introduced adult literacy evening schools, and, during the day sold vegetables at a street corner. Later, after passing her Grade Seven exam, she became a shop assistant in the local store, thus enabling her to pay our school fees. A year later, one excessively raining day, father was picked up drowned in a flooded ditch, an empty bottle of Smirnoff and a dead rat in his jacket pocket—so I heard it whispered fearfully at the funeral wake. People believed that he had been bewitched. It was about at that time that Takemore disappeared from the township too—for his new house in the suburbs, so I had assumed. And, oh, how I had envied him.

I am a lecturer at the university now because of the hard work of my late mother.

The well-rounded Minister does not even bother to stand up to reply.

"We have heard about you university people," he says, assuming an expression that he thinks is dangerous. Maybe it was, once upon a time, when trees could do the bump jive and rocks could be pinched. "But just try it, we are waiting for you." His fat cheeks are shining like twenty-thousand dollar fat cooks.

Later that afternoon, as I wait in my old 405 at a red robot in the city center, a ragged beggar, carrying a bulging sack over his shoulder, approaches my open window.

"Excuse me comrade," he says through the window, smiling at me

with stained teeth. He has a matted beard, and an offensive smell wafts into the car from him. "Can you please spare some coins for the poor—drought wiped me out in the resettlements."

I look at him, and gasp in surprise.

"Skin of the earth!" I cry out as I recognize him.

Behind him, the sky is clad in blue skin tights that threaten to burst at the seams and reveal the king of bums.

Amasese: traditional beer; *Basop!*: Beware! (Afrikaans colloquial); *Bomafana*: my boys; *Hey Wena!*: Hey you!; *Mayibabo!*: A lament; *Ntikoloshis*: goblins; *Toyi Toying*: marching and singing at half trot