

## The Return

Nimble as butterflies, his hands worked by habit as he stared out over a blaze of cannas at the far hills. Even at this distance one could see the silver plumes of the tall cane.

On the back of one hand, a tiny, dark mound of snuff had appeared, tapped from the little oval hole in the Singleton's tin by a gnarled forefinger. It disappeared in a loud inhalation and was followed by another for the left nostril. The old man sat, eyes closed in delicious anticipation of a sneeze, memories temporarily suspended.

It had been so long ago. A gawky Pondo youth with a shaved head, standing there on big bare feet in travel-crumpled but clean khaki shirt and shorts, watching the storeman. Wondering if his battered cardboard suitcase was safe in the dark and musty barracks. The barracks from which he had scrambled sleepy-eyed and nervous before dawn to the waking bell, as the last clangorous notes hung in the mist of the valley, along with the echoing ha-de-da cries of startled ibis.

The storeman had made some marks in a big book by the light of a hissing Tilley lamp and handed him two coarse grey blankets, a billy can and a new cane knife. Clutching his awkward bundle, he pushed away from the scarred counter, through the others crowding behind him.

He sighed and tapped more snuff. That had indeed been a long time ago.

Pillay had been less than impressed with his new gang. But his lean Indian features were expressionless as he surveyed them, standing there with the broad cane knives held across their ribby bodies like shields - bare feet shuffling in the chill dust of the early dawn. There would be no bonuses earned with this lot. He turned and silently led the way down the hill. The thought made him wish he had slipped the usual half-jack of cane-spirit into his gumboot for its stealthy comfort in the fields.

The first day had been a hell on earth. Pillay watched them toil through the mounting morning heat, blunt new cane knives bouncing off the stubborn stalks. The rivets in the handles raised blisters in the first hour, then tore the sweat softened skin so that every stroke was a decision to be weighed against the pain it would cause.

Somehow, the sun edged across the heavens until Pillay glanced at his tethered Zobo watch, dropped it back in a pocket, grunted something and headed off back to the barracks. They looked at each other uncertainly, then gathered the long-empty water dixie and scurried thankfully after him.

That night, stuffed with mealie-meal, beans and ration meat, the new cutters watched admiringly as an old hand showed them how to put an edge on the

tselema. Squatting among them, he squinted through the acrid smoke of a hand-rolled cigarette – ash and shreds of tobacco dropping on his cane-scarred hands as they plied a file in long, screeching strokes down the curved length of a new blade. Later, he took it to the stone, where under his sure touch, in a pool of spit and powdered stone .. the blade took on a terrifying keenness. The old man smiled fleetingly as he recalled the feel of that blade as he took it from the veteran. The hated, cumbersome implement had become a warrior's weapon. He drifted off into exhausted sleep with it beside his creaking wire bed.

The ocean was a thin, gunmetal line across an indigo sky when the barracks echoed to the jangle of the rising bell. The new recruits cursed and hunched on the edges of their cots, or, lay unmoving but awake, gathering their will to confront the new day.

Up at the house, there was light in the kitchen. nKosaan would be out in a moment, his khaki crisp and the big hat set just so. From the edge of the lamplight, his saddled pony would be brought forward by a yawning groom and he would mount and be gone into the darkness.

Nightjars flurried up at their feet as they trudged down the packed clay of the track to the valley fields, but by the time Pillay showed them the cut for the day, the east showed the blush of a new sun gilding the sea. A sea so different from the one he knew.

At home the sea was a thundering presence that boomed against the cliffs and rushed, hissing and foaming, across the flat shelves of rock where the women foraged for shellfish. At night, when the moon was full, he huddled under the smoky blankets and listened to the sea gods rage, far below the hilltop straggle of huts. Here, in Natal, the surf gently rolled and collapsed beyond the wild plantains and riverine bush that fringed the silver dunes.

Later he would see nKosaan take out a small boat with two engines in which he and his laughing friends brought back fish such as the boy had never seen in Pondoland. Long, sleek, black and silver shapes that were washed clean of blood and sand with the bandaged and leaking plastic hose that filled the watering trough. The draught mules would snuff and back away at the scent of it all, their long-lashed eyes wide under the blinkers - the mule boys cursing and hauling on the lines to drag them back.

In the dryness of winter there were the fires. The watchman would shamble through the sleeping compound with his glowworm torch, and by the first clangs of the bell, they would be groping for the tselemas and pulling on the hessian tunics. Then, with Pillay coughing over his first cigarette, the gang would jog out in the direction of another orange glow against the clouds. nKosaan would be gone in a drumming of hoof-beats and when they arrived at the fire, he would be pacing up and down the line of flame, waiting for them.

In the dead of one winter, he was woken by shuffling footsteps as the old nightwatchman headed for the bell. Outside, the compound was a place of shadows and silvered open spaces. The glow in the western sky was strangely disconnected from the world around them as he found himself out on the road to the valley fields, the others at his elbow or somewhere behind in the thin dust of their passage.

At the fire, he squinted through the snarling, red heat at nKosaan - a raging, cursing silhouette against the capering flames. Then, like the others, he swung his sacking shift across his face against the searing breath of the fire as the tselemas rose and fell at the commands of their employer.

The cane toppled in swathes and lay, ungathered, under urgent, bare feet as the fire break grew before their combined fury. Behind their labouring backs, the hungry orange wall roared its disappointment, then burrowed and fussed amongst the trashed cane with brief interest before subsiding in sullen crackles and sputterings. Panting, they dropped, exhausted, to their haunches, sticky with the blood of the vanquished host.

The pony, head-jerking against the reins and dancing sideways under the weight of her rider, bunched nervous hindquarters and exploded away at the first touch of heels to her sides. Earthbound, the cutters watched her disappear into the smoke and darkness, her rider a dark shape crouched over her shoulders, heading for the glow away to the south. Where the other gang would be sliding and clawing their way down into the river gully to face the flames.

In a sudden, near silence, they all heard it. A high, thin scream of sheer terror, drawn out on the night wind; the sound of a man who sees Death fold its wings about him.

The old man stopped in his snuff-taking, feeling, as he had that night, the tightening of the thin skin at his temples - as he had risen, unthinking, and sped away on silent, bare feet into the black and orange dawn.

Had raced along the hard clay road until he reached the brink of the river valley, where the pony had lost her footing and tumbled headlong down the long, crumbling slope, crushing her rider beneath her and then throwing him clear to where he now lay, broken, in the wilting cane. Lay, unable to move and yet cruelly aware that he was about to die.

Lay, until the wild figure, brandishing a great gleaming blade, dropped cat-like from the crest of the road and slid and staggered to where the white man lay, hair singeing and shirt smouldering, the shameful screams still on his dusty lips. Until, helpless in the steely grip of a bony hand on his collar, he was dragged and jerked, foot by agonizing foot up the bank that slid away in tiny, hissing avalanches into the red darkness below.

Dragged to safety. Dragged in an endless succession of jerks up to where they could lie in a tangle of dusty limbs and mixed and rasping breaths. To lie there and listen to the pony die in a long and unbroken shriek of agony that cut through the triumphant roar and crackle of the flames.

When, pale and shrunken, in his blue pyjamas, nKosaan returned from isiBehlele, the company hospital in Park Rynie, the boy was standing on the red-polished stoep to greet him. Elevated by some mysterious order from the fields to a white-suited, clumsy presence in the company house beneath the great wild fig. At the sight of him, the colourless eyes of the white man softened for a long moment, before he returned to the business of arranging his crutches for a slow and shuffling progress to the front bedroom.

There followed many years of service in the house; years that saw his station change from assistant factotum to major domo when Chinema finally left the house for the last time, sandaled feet hidden beneath her sari as always - moving slowly and painfully in the last stages of her sickness. And so, suddenly, he was the sole keeper of his employer's inner life.

Night would find him in the moth-swirling light of a hissing Tilley lamp, a simple meal on the black Dover stove, listening to the murmur of the radio in the living-room and awaiting instructions to serve.

Later, he would wash the few dishes, douse the lamp and pad silently from the house. Occasionally, he would glance back at the yellow glow from a side window and sorrowfully shake his head.

Until the arrival of the woman.

At first, she was only a visitor, when nKosaan, in his black suit, had taken the truck and jolted away to the main road, and then to Umkomaas, his supper untouched under an inverted soupdish in the iced-up paraffin Kelvinator. Long after, as sleep hovered over the blanketed forms in the barracks, the truck came back and the high laughter of a woman floated across the silent canefields.

nKosaan seemed embarrassed when he told him he was going to marry the woman.

It was as though nKosaan expected permission to bring her to the house on a permanent basis. He had simply nodded and said "Yebo, nKosaan," and that was all. The pale eyes studied him a moment before turning away and nothing more was said on the matter.

Only once had he left the estate about his own affairs. A swaying bus had taken him back to Umtata, and from the northern outskirts of the capital, he had set out on foot towards the coast.

When there were no more hills to cross, he had set down the yellow trunk and stared at the crumbling remains of the huts. Some heavier uprights of the

cattlekraal, as skew as malformed teeth, still protruded from the encroaching veld grass that whispered and flourished in the manure-rich soil.

That night he slept off his exhaustion, wrapped in the bright trade blankets bought for the others. Back in the barrack hut, so far to the south, a khaki envelope from the Department of Health, Umtata, lay unopened in the small satchel that held his few personal things, hidden away with the mistrust of the unlettered. Now, when the few remaining neighbours told him of the great sickness, he shouldered the trunk and walked away without looking back.

He was there on the night nKosaan hurried his woman to the station-wagon, a little suitcase clutched to her swollen belly and her breathing loud and deliberate. Next day, when he went in to start work, nKosaan was sleeping, fully-clothed, on top of the bed. But when he took him tea, he woke, bright and happy and after a snatched breakfast, he was gone in the station-wagon, unshaven but singing as he went.

With the coming of the children, there was a softening in all of them. There was more work for him, but still he found time to spend with the golden children of the nKosaan, watching them grow and marveling at their facility for early authority. Karen would order him about with such serious confidence in her right to do so and Mark, younger by two years, treated him as an equal and as a confidante from the time he was able to walk unaided.

Head on one side, polishing silver on the back step, he listened to their first nursery-school songs and taught them his own melodies - half forgotten from another life. At the first piping cry of alarm from Karen it was he who had raced down the gumboot lined passage to press the children against the outside wall of the house. Floorbrush still in hand he placed his body between them and the mamba as it sailed past, slim, deadly head four feet above the ground, and close enough for them to see their three frozen faces reflected in the soulless eyes.

It had been the square bottles. The fires and the square bottles, the tractor breakdowns and the square bottles, the mule sickness and the square bottles. So that in the end, the woman had taken the children and the very old station-wagon and driven away.

And that had been that. Nkosaan had stopped bringing home the square bottles from town but he remained alone, his face set and cold. His shadow mourned the children and the woman, but his loyalty was to the nKosaan so he ghosted about the place and kept his counsel. Like this they lived through the summer and into the autumn.

Pillay was not keen. He surveyed the dapper figure before him in its darned shirt and yellow tie, the snap-brimmed hat at a rakish angle. In the warmth of an autumn Sunday, the maroon pullover was making it sweat under its tweed suit, but it bore this stoically. Today was a day for action and making impressions.

“Man, y’all gonna frighten der Merrem, like dat.” said Pillay, making one last, listless attempt to forestall him.

The man said nothing, but settled himself in the passenger seat of the rusty Volkswagen as Pillay started up, cowed by the prospect of the alternative. He really had been quite sure that nobody had marked the disappearance of the top two inches of Johnny Walker in every bottle he ferried back for the nKosaan.

At the little house in the town, Pillay fretted in the car as the erect, slight figure tapped at the door and then averted his gaze when it was opened. So it was that nobody could accurately guess what was said, but the man was back in his seat within a minute or so. As they drove away, Pillay thought the Madam looked thinner, reflected in the cracked rear view mirror like that as she watched them go.

He shifted his position and took more snuff. He permitted himself a satisfied smile as he remembered the expression on the face of the nKosaan, standing there in the kitchen doorway. Against the excited chatter in the dining room, the bond between them was very strong, although they did not touch.

“Second time you’ve saved my life.....my friend” was all he said.