

The Photograph and Other Stories

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The Photograph

*Three-legged, four-eyed, bent-double
So frail, the baggage so huge
A battalion of expectant grandchildren
Left by parents bare-foot, bare-body
Stomach rumbling, huts crumbling, hearts grumbling
Can the old body cope with the helter-skelter
Of bringing up the waddling toddler
Prone to temper tantrums
The emotional turbulence of adolescence
The day in and day out duel
To bring bread and butter on table?
The heart yearns in spite of its years to provide
Yet the social clock
Has chimed 11 o'clock!*

It was a black and white rectangular paper, relatively new when one took cognizance of when it was taken. She had kept this special paper for her grand children who were very young when their parents passed away. She felt it was unfair if all the photographs would just disappear, leaving nothing for the children to hold on to.

She was frail, three-legged and bespectacled. A shiny string secured the fragile second optical pair from falling off. One could not be too sure about her since she was always bent almost double. Her face was riddled with contour ridges. She had seen it all, the ups and downs, the pains and joys, the ululations and lamentations. She was surprised when a newspaper crew invaded her dilapidated habitation to take photographs and ask questions on her longevity-the secrets of her long life, they said! They were upbeat about her reaching 100. Some posed for a photo or two with her, obviously more excited about her clocking 100 more than the owner of those years.

...Did they know how it felt like to be 100 and single-handed? To be a father, mother, uncle, auntie and grandmother and grandfather all rolled into one to the little orphans? Did they know what it meant to be 100 and wake up to change nappies at mid-night? Even during the day it is a

job and a half. Do they know that it is a feat to be able to walk and move about unaided? She was grateful to the Almighty for giving so many days. However, if she had her way, she would have asked to live long but with the three children and their father. What joy is there when the bird is deprived of all its feathers? How does it fly? How does it convince the doubting Thomases that it had one of the most beautiful plumages ever created? How can it be warm? All elements play havoc on such an unguarded body with devastating effects. In such a scenario, how can the bird be happy?

Today she decided to gather her battalion of grandchildren...

...On my right is your grandfather who worked for van de Merwe for decades. Very rarely did he work outside his boss' kitchen. He regarded cooking as a job, which should be confined to the workplace. He did not like the job because he felt emasculated but had no choice. He had a passion for the betterment of his children through education as a result he was prepared to swallow his Zulu pride and stoop low for the family...he stomached physical and verbal abuses stoically for your parents...

To his right is our last-born. He came after your father, Sipho. After working very long, van de Merwe decided to reward your grandfather by sending the youngest to school. He was an obvious choice since he was the most intellectually gifted. He, however, never thanked your grandfather's boss for this. He said that van de Merwe was supposed to pay his father enough to enable him to send his own children to school. He thought that that was a well orchestrated move to kill blacks' self esteem-his white-haired father was emasculated enough already by cooking for him, he maintained. During the vacations, he would come and challenge the status quo. One day he engaged van de Merwe in a debate. The argument was sparked by the latter's attack on the Liberation Movement as reported in the press:

'The terrorists are disturbing the peace of the land...they think they can wrestle power and impose their communist government...'he posed, surveyed his listeners with a who-can-challenge-this-gospel-truth look, before continuing: 'not in a thousand years! Yes, not in a thousand years as aptly put by our no nonsense P.M.! You munts aren't ready for self-government. Ian should have put it at a million by then perhaps your thick black skulls could have learnt a thing or two from the Aryan Race. Even then it would be dumping this country to the dogs!'

Not all could understand every word van de Merwe uttered but all, including the very young who in fact clung for dear life onto their mothers' rags, got the gist of the vitriol: the taunting voice, the accompanying insulting arrogant gestures, the posture and facial expression gave it all away. This was Goliath incarnate speaking and no one dared challenge his decree.

'Stop feeding my people with that trash!' Sifelani said coming out of the crowd pointing at van de Merwe with his right hand with his left in his pocket his voice cracking with emotion, his chest heaving as if it would burst any time. If it weren't for my people whom you abuse at will, where would you be?...It won't take us a thousand years to take back what is rightfully ours. In fact I would have preferred a thousand hours!'

At the end van de Merwe was so red that we thought blood would gush out of his face. He paced up and down and up and down he paced cursing all the time. The crowd seemed to enjoy the spectacle and was now far from the previously quiet and timid bowed down tail between the legs crowd. Not all understood every word uttered by the pugilists but what they fully witnessed was a battle which their own seemed to have won.

'Thank your bloody ancestors that you are the kitchen boy's son. If you weren't, I'd have the whole bloody clan sent to the gallows', van de Merwe said in a more subdued tone the utterance serving the purpose of saving his face than anything else before leaving in a huff.

Two reactions were dominant: two elderly men came to where Sifelani was and in hushed voices warned:

'How could you do that? Your actions jeopardize your life in particular and the livelihoods of all of us. You want us to starve? Is this what they teach you at university?' before they went away heads shaking and worry inscribed all over their faces.

The majority however congratulated Sifelani for standing up for all of them. In fact our community was never the same after the experience-people simply started to question things. Even van de Merwe started to treat us all in a different light. After the battle he avoided such encounters. I personally was not surprised when Sifelani abandoned his studies at university to join the fighters. I was heartbroken but not surprised. I was in a way even glad for him and the family because I foresaw his verbal altercations with van de Merwe turning very ugly one of the days. Who would listen to his side of the story if it were to happen? He would have lost the duel because van de Merwe had the umpire on his side. When the war was over, we looked forward in vain to seeing him walk through the door. *My heart has never stopped bleeding for my little boy. He was so full of life. He was one of those people you could not afford to ignore or fail to notice...how can I be happy when my little boy just disappeared into thin air? Perhaps he was devoured by wild animals on his way to Mozambique or Zambia. Perhaps he drowned. Perhaps he was killed during the bombings in Zambia and Mozambique...whatever stole his life was violent and certainly premature. How can a mother sleep soundly when her child died like an animal and like an animal no ceremony was performed for his roaming spirit to join his long departed...*

On my left is John, our elder son, Takura, Tafadzwa and Tanaka's father. He was a strong man and enjoyed flexing his muscles. The mine owned by van de Merwe's brother -in -law was a natural attraction to him. Before long they made him boss boy. He was a darling to his superiors. His subordinates respected him especially for leading from the front. He earned respect, not by coercion but by modelling. His argument was that being boss boy did not mean that one had to loaf around but be a lead worker. His loyalty was frightening but sad-sad because he did not have much to show for it after years of unquestioning sacrifice and toil. Even when he was off-duty, he would 'while up his time' going to his workplace and would often end up assisting or even rescuing on-duty colleagues from some mess. Mr. Brooks had a shop and a bar at the mine compound. The workers would buy expensive beer and food on credit, which they paid for on payday. Many workers were part and parcel of the cycle including John. Suddenly his health began to fail him and most of his meager earnings went to the nángas and fortunetellers to no avail. *Who didn't know that John's Achilles' heel was his weakness for those from the opposite sex but can one just watch? It was confirmed that it was the disease. I wasn't surprised. John had too many women admirers...but is there no room for mortal humans to err? Just one slip and one sleeps forever! How can a mother be happy, even when she turns 1000, when the eldest child, the heir apparent, passes away so prematurely and after suffering so immensely that one wished him dead? The 100 years are a burden when such things happen...your happiness bulges with the child growing inside...you watch it grow from day one...you feel so fulfilled because the child is your extension. You know you are getting old and you hope the child will take over. You are more or less a child again and the child provides. You praise the Lord for that then suddenly you realize failing health in the young. You hope it is a passing phase. In fact it begins as a private illness. 'Mom, I do not feel well today...but do not worry I will be alright soon' you reassure, you advise him to slow down. Then one day, he is dismissed prematurely from work. The illness is slowly becoming public. Then he is given a few off-sick days before slipping into indefinite sick leave. The illness persists. It becomes public and the worker's salary cut-this is one of life's greatest ironies-a sick person's salary is cut by half then discontinued during the time he or she needs it the most! But did they ever say they do it for charity?*

How can you be happy when you watch what you have treasured most slip through your seemingly paralyzed hands. You literally die with the dying friend; spouse or child and you literally grieve each day of your life. Perennially, you mourn. How can you not when so much in the environment reminds you...I mourn when I sing his favorite song, when I eat his favorite meal, I don't finish it. Some traits in the grand children remind me of their parents' early life and I mourn. When I look at Bongani, Gugu's last born and carbon copy, I am filled with both joy and sadness-I mourn with a smile on my face. Yes you can laugh with the laughing and smile with the smiling but deep down you will be suffering.

On John's left is our only daughter Gugulethu, Farai, Vimbai, Thabani and Bongani's mother. She was the apple of your grandfather's eye and mine too. He always called her 'aunt'. We

expected her to live to a ripe and mature age like us and become arbiter and counselor when need arose in the family. The boys also loved their sister-cum-aunt and often assisted her do her chores. When the time came for her to start her own family, an affliction gripped all of us-a somber atmosphere enveloped the homestead for some time. She seemed to have gone to another planet yet she had married into a local family a few homesteads away. Then we started to hear stories of our in-law's escapades with other women in his life, and we consoled ourselves that these were mere rumors and dismissed them with the contempt we thought they deserved. Then we also met him with these other women in his life, and half-consoled ourselves that they were some distant relatives unknown to us. Then we heard that our son-in-law had acquired a new wife and we were disgusted but not surprised. When we met Gugu she was almost always nursing a swollen lip, head, eye...she always attributed it to some accident during her daily chores. I know she knew after some time that we knew she was not telling the truth. After some time, our in-law had acquired another wife. The abuse continued. We convinced her to leave so that she would live but the damage to her health had already been done. She seemed to be deteriorating in health each day...*how can one sleep at peace when one's mind is filled with reminiscences of one's flesh and blood eating away everyday? How can one be happy when one watched helplessly one's flesh and blood being led to the slaughter like a sacrificial lamb in full view of every Mandla, Mamvuto and Farai? When you intervene, how can you tell that it is too late? When you intervene, how can you be certain that your own flesh and blood will immediately see the way you are seeing which she might not be seeing since it hasn't dawned on her? My Gugu started dying a long time before but I couldn't rescue her-I couldn't stop the inevitable...*

Afterwards she felt as though a huge boulder had been lifted off her shoulder. None of her grand children uttered a word but the little flickering lights in their eyes reflected gratitude at the grandmother for filling the void in their lives.

What a relief!

by

Mika Nyoni

It was my final. I was excited. It had been a long and arduous journey. It was a relief-I did not want to continue to squeeze my parents' already stressed financial coffers. I was the seed which had been provided with the essential conditions for it to germinate, grow and bear fruit bountifully-enough to feed the entire clan. So far I hadn't disappointed: book prizes every academic year, a minimum of an upper second pass since my freshman years. It was a record all my classmates would die to attain. Some of the creative lot had christened me 'Professor' while others referred to me as 'The Consultant'. I seemed to have no problems grasping whatever new concepts I came across in the Actuarial Science courses which came my way. In fact at times I was really mindboggled when my classmates seemed to be stuck and bewildered in some academic pothole. I did not apply for my Third Year attachment placement. The Dean of our faculty personally secured one for me in the best insurance company in the country where again they seemed to savour my presence. On the day of my departure the Manager called me and presented me with a letter of appreciation as well as a very expensive looking cellphone bought by my mentors.

'Thank you, again! We hope we're going to get interns in future who're as good! As a company we sat down and this is what we've decided' he said handing me a sealed A4 khaki envelop.

'Please take your time to go through the offer then come back to us at your earliest convenience'

'Can ...can I open it...now?'

'I thought you would need time to decide... but you can still do it here...'

I then went on to open the envelop with some difficulty because of the anxiety which had transformed my entire body into a bundle of nerves. What offer could a multi-million US dollar transnational concern listed on all the who's who of Global Stock Exchanges offer a poor peasant boy like me? I could have understood or become less nervous if she had talked about an 'order' not an 'offer'-an offer meant that I could decline, that I had the power. What power? From what source? This made me more nervous a fact amply by my trembling perspiration drenched fingers.

The company offered to pay my tuition for the remaining two semesters and a trainee actuary scientist's post upon my successful completion of the course.

'When you're through, sign the two forms after deleting the inapplicable,' the manager advised.

The inapplicable? Yes I located the section she was referring to. I then very carefully deleted the part which read 'do not accept'. For the umpteenth time I checked to ensure that the 'I accept' part was the one which really remained.

I smiled to myself as all these recollections flashed through my mind as I tackled the questions.

'It's now 16.50 hours. You're reminded that you may not be allowed to leave the exam room from now on since we're now in the last 10 minutes,' the invigilator bellowed.

At this time I had already embarked on my revision...they didn't call me Mr. Perfect for nothing! As I flipped through the exam booklet –my last one, at least as an undergraduate, I mildly smiled at the responses I had proffered...this was supposed to be my signature paper and I intended to bury it in style!

Then the unthinkable happened! The cellphone screamed forcing everyone to turn to where I was seated at the back of the Great Hall military-style-like, as if some switch had been turned on and the robotic figures surprise and shock and pity painted on their visages had turned in unison. What was written on all those was 'How on earth could you be so careless?' Without bothering to find the little metal devil I buried my face into my hands in shame and s-c-r-e-a-m-e-d. How could I let everyone down like that. I s-c-r-e-a-m-e-d. Such an offence was an automatic twelve month suspension. I s-c-r-e-a-m-e-d...the little devil also s-c-r-e-a-m-e-d. No, it jeered, taunting its hapless and helpless master cum buddy cum victim. My body was now submerged in perspiration, tears and free-flowing mucus partially submerging the super exam script. I didn't care. How could I after flashing my future down the stinking lavatory? Some hand touched me on my shoulder perhaps to escort me out of the exam room together with my offensive gadget. I s-c-r-e-a-m-e-d even louder than before. Then somebody shouted: 'What on earth is happening!'

That was mother! I s-c-r-e-a-m-e-d! How could I face her? I s-c-r-e-a-m-e-d! How could I face the whole family, after this great betrayal? How could I face the insurance people who were to become my people in a few weeks' time?

'Please stop this nonsense!' mother said giving me a vigorous shake.

I then realized, to my relief, that I had been dreaming on my study desk. I recalled that I had gone to bed very early and woke up early to perfect my act only to be stolen by sleep. I did not normally do this on exam days. I guess I was anxious and nervous. The phone alarm clock may have acted as the catalyst to the horror dream. I took the phone, removed the battery and Sim Card and left everything, to the amusement of all my family members, before I left for the exam. I had had enough problems with my electronic friend in a day!

The Great Mystery

by

Mika Nyoni

I was in form 4 at a mission boarding school where I was ,not because my family was affluent but, because it was close to our home and, more importantly, since I was the eldest my parents invested their meager resources on my good education, which was expected to pay dividends in my looking after my siblings later. Moreover the fees could be paid in installments over an agreed period for deserving cases. I was a perennially deserving one and this was an open secret to any who had stayed at the mission for a while.

As I sat down doing my laundry I wondered how I managed to stay that long at the school with virtually no resources to talk about. I could not help smiling as I thought about how I survived the four year sentence especially the initial period. Then the students and staff members who hadn't been acquainted with my situation simply dismissed me as a difficult, scruffy and carefree character when it came to presentation and deportment. While others brought brand new everything I had second hand everything. To make matters worse some of my beloved possessions were several sizes bigger and I had to adjust them. By the end of my fourth form I had become an accomplished cobbler and my needlework skills were impeccable. By that time I was engaged as an unofficial cobbler by the school sports department repairing balls and sports shoes for a nominal fee but most of the time as part of my general work.

I took great care washing the skeletal remains of my uniform, which were threadbare and threatened to crumble any time. I had invested part of the proceeds from my cobbler assignments in procuring a needle and sewing thread in order to attend to my uniform's insatiable appetite for attention. I had become so conspicuous that I could positively be identified a kilometer away. The uniform had at last succumbed to the elements: the once navy blue short and shirt had turned a bright feathery off-white color and the collar was a sorry site in spite of my inverting it twice. Despite all this many respected me for my academic exploits. I scooped all academic prizes on Prize-giving days-what I lacked in material possessions I made up in academia. On such days I, a merciless and hardened hunter darted to and fro head raised high collecting my trophies dressed in my humble and revealing garb. It was my chance to shine and beat home and away hands down the spoilt brats!

After I had finished the laundry I hung it on the line where others were. As I walked back to the hostel I was saddened to realize how out of place mine was and how conspicuous I always appeared inside the shreds now on the line.

When I returned about an hour later I was shocked to find my uniform gone. What confused me even more was the fact that all other uniforms were there and untouched and swaying merrily in

the sun. What could have attracted the thief, I continued to wonder in a futile endeavor to recover my prized possessions. It was futile because I knew exactly where I had left it and trusted my memory too well to doubt it.

I then made up my mind to tell my friend about the loss before going to the Boarding Master to make a report .I found Kuga busy pressing his several sets of uniform.Kuga and I had been very close since Form 1.The two of us were from two different worlds: he seemed to have everything whilst I had nothing materially to talk about. I could even afford to leave my trunk open, he couldn't. At least this is what I always thought before this mind-boggling incident. I still couldn't believe that what I had was worth stealing. Whoever had stolen my uniform was a mad kleptomaniac! This is the only logical explanation my tried and tested intellect could proffer.

Kuga looked surprised, paid his condolences and then offered me one of his uniforms an offer I had the luxury to turn down much earlier. Then I had flatly refused telling him in no uncertain terms that I was comfortable in my accustomed plumage. Earlier his argument was that a spare one would lift the strain off the only one I had. I remember asking him, out of curiosity, how his parents would react upon which he chuckled and told me that they wouldn't even notice! In spite of his insistence I flatly refused-typical proud me! What I didn't tell him then was that that uniform could have made me the centre of attraction. The sudden metamorphosis could not just pass unnoticed and that would have made me very much uneasy. This time around I was cornered, humbled and troubled and could not spurn the alms.

Kuga and I then went to the B.M. who for some time thought that we were playing some sick and very belated April's Fool joke on him. I still remember how the conversation went:

'How can I help you, boys?'He said looking piercingly above the rim of his glasses as if the colorless lenses would obstruct his view of us.

'I can't...I can't find my uniform...It went missing from the wash line', at last I managed to relay the message.

'Let me get this straight and clear', he said removing his spectacles and sliding back on his chair.Using his spectacles as a pointer he continued, 'You're saying *your*, I mean *your* uniform was stolen, not *his*?'

'Yes, sir'

The huge man had a long hearty laugh which left his naturally small eyes submerged in little spilling lakes of tears. After he had finally gained sufficient composure to just carry on we discussed the way forward. Kuga reiterated the offer he had made earlier, a move described by

the B.M. as ‘a great philanthropic feat- a living testimony of charity begun at home’ and Kuga as ‘a friend indeed’. We then left his office.

The following day I put on the new uniform. I was more self-conscious than ever before. Many of the students told me how much they liked the new me and confessed to having shunned me for dressing like a scarecrow !Deep down I was still confused-the puzzle of the theft hadn’t been solved: the motive and means were still a great mystery. I just kept wondering why one would scale a three-meter high security fence to steal rags. How the thief got in undetected was a billion –dollar puzzle. More mind-boggling was the motive. In spite of my tied, tested and documented genius I threw in the towel-this was beyond my mental capabilities.

After completing our examinations we had an emotional party with close friends which was footed by Kuga.Buses to my home area passed the school very early reaching home by 7am.Kuga told me that his mother would be driving to the school to take him home later in the day. It was a pity, he said, that we were traveling in opposite directions. If it weren't the case he would have loved to pass through our home. I was glad that that was the situation.

Kuga escorted me to the bus stop which was a few meters from our hostel. We waited for what seemed to be a century before we heard the rumbling of the only bus that passed through the mission farm to our area and waited for a lifetime before the one-eyed ancient vehicle arrived.

'Mika, I'll miss you. I'm sure we'll meet one day' Kuga said hugging me before I boarded the bus. The lump in my throat only permitted me to utter a hoarse 'will miss you, too’.

In a way it was a relief when I finally boarded the omnibusinosaur because there was very little talking between us. In my case I was lost in thought replaying our mission days. I also drifted into the future-*perhaps I wasn't going to meet Kuga again. Perhaps he would quickly forget this poor boy that told him lots of village stories that seemed to enthrall him immensely. Perhaps...*

The bus, a relic of antiquity and in normal circumstances a museum piece, took its time to cover the 12-kilometer dust road that separated my home from the school. Most of its kind had long succumbed to old age-it was a miracle that that collection of metal, rubber and broken glass could still move. It groaned, it squeaked, it quirked, it shrieked, it screamed and it sighed as it wobbled along the uneven terrain carefully otherwise it would slip and sleep for good. My thoughts would race to and fro home and the school-my four year experience would come in flashes of sad and happy moments, they would race towards my arrival home-how my little sister Gugu would literally fly to me oblivious of the danger posed by jutting rocks and sharp tree stubs on her runway. I would sigh a big sigh of relief upon her safe landing in my arms. In a space of five minutes, I would be furnished with a synopsis of what would have taken place in my three months’ absence. This she would do at the top of her voice gasping for breath afraid perhaps that any other member of the family would rob her of the limelight by informing me first. I almost

always found Mandla, my young brother, away at school or tending our modest assemblage of livestock: one ox, one cow and two donkeys. Our little chatterbox would always be the first to see him from far off or hear the livestock bells approaching and fly to him to fill him up with what would have taken place in his few hours of absence. The bus was too slow to transport me home and reunite with my family. I'd underestimated how much I missed them.

I found all of them at home this time: father on the plough, Mandla with the whip and mother and her able assistant on the seed basket. Apparently Mandla had completed his Grade 7 Examinations making him available for the planting season. Sis' Gugu was due to make her debut appearance at school the following January.

'Bhuti Mika!' Gugu announced my presence already in full flight.

'Where on earth did you get that brand new uniform?' I was taken aback by mother's question and so was Gugu who stood frozen in my arms panting. I hadn't prepared for this. Father signaled for the span to stop to which it complied instantly. With her arms akimbo mother proceeded to enquire about my latest acquisition:

'We may not have much but I never thought you'd not only steal but also parade your ill-gotten wealth for all to admire!' Gugu very slowly extricated herself from dirty Bhuti Mika. At least Bhuti Mika needed to be cleared and cleansed first to be huggable.

'Do they teach you to steal at the mission, son? I'm disappointed in you. What example are you giving to them?' Father said gesturing on my little brother and sister betrayal written in his voice.

'I...I. didn't steal. A friend gave me after mine was stolen...'

Both mother and father laughed when they heard this claim and as quickly returned to their no nonsense mode.

'Please take this thief to the mission to return his loot. I'd have gone with him myself but I'm afraid the Hare and Baboon story he is narrating would make me wring his neck! How would you let us down like that?' Father said before unyoking the span.

'What are you still doing there? Remove the uniform and let's go to the mission now to return it'

'Mother, I'm sorry...'

'Leave the apologizing for the mission and the boy you left naked and crying there...We need to go there and back before noon-there's a lot of work to be done'

I wanted to tell her that I was sorry that I should have told them about the uniform but there was no chance for that, the verdict was passed, announced and the court dismissed. Since there was no money we had to walk the entire 12 kilometers to the mission and another 12 kilometers back. This wasn't a big issue on my part-the real issue was my reappearance in invisible chains at the school in tatters in full view of the entire school. We were the first group to leave the school, the rest of the candidates still had one or two papers to write and the non-exam classes still had about two weeks to go before closure of schools.

The whole journey to school was characterized by solid tension. Mother led the way more than five steps ahead and now and again she would turn back and make her feelings very clear about what had happened. During such episodes I would slow down or even stop afraid of whatever punishment she might have deemed necessary.

'How would you after all the sacrifices we had for you?'

'Mother, a friend gave me the uniform,' I said hoping that she would be convinced and spare us the trouble of going to the mission. She stopped, turned back and slowly made her pronouncement: 'I don't want to hear that non-sense again'

The rest of the journey was undertaken mostly in silence serve for a few outbursts and lamentations about how the mission, of all places, had killed her son's morals.

At last we arrived at the school. I made an effort to close the gap between us so that it wouldn't be too obvious that we had had an altercation.

'Mika, are you already back for your results?'' naughty Toronga quipped upon seeing me to which the other students laughed.

We got to the head's office and knocked and were ushered in:

'Why are you dressed like that?' Mr. Maligwa asked his voice full of disgust. 'Form 4 mentality baffles me...you attend four years of secondary school education then you think you're on top of the world even without the result slip! When your-not-so-good results finally come you again baffle me: hat in hand, head on the side, eyes on the floor, tail between legs you beg for a lower sixth place...what a metamorphosis! What pretence!'

'Sir, I left this morning for home putting on the uniform Kuga gave me after mine was stolen. My parents think I stole it-that's why my mother has come...Kuga should still be here. You could ask him...The B.M is also aware of this...'

Looking at me with penetrating and unmoving eyes the head reached for the telephone, dialed someone whom I later learnt, through their conversation to be the B.M, Mr Chasu.

‘May you come to the Head’s office immediately? Send a prefect to Kuga’s hostel...I also want to have a word with him’ before returning the colossal receiver back his eyes still glued on me as if to keep complete surveillance of my person unsure of my continued presence.

The BM then came accompanied by a worried looking Kuga who lightened up a bit when he saw me. The two’s story corroborated mine. Mother could only open her mouth wide open in wonder. In fact Kuga went on to tell us that his parents had arrived and he had packed and was about to go when we arrived. We went to the boys’ hostel where an expensive-looking vehicle was parked and an elderly couple was anxiously waiting.

‘We’ve heard a lot about you, son’ Kuga’s father said after the introductions ‘and I’m glad we finally met you...but,’ he said turning to his son, ‘but you’d said that your friend had left. Were you trying to hide him from us?’

‘He had left but he had to come back to complete his clearance’, Kuga explained.

‘I understand your home is only 12 or so kilometers from here. We’ll take you there and then we’ll return to our Bulawayo road.

‘Why all this trouble we can walk back...’mother protested. ‘You...the boy has already done us a lot of good’.

In spite of all the protestations the couple insisted on taking us home. I was cleared of the misdemeanor (but at what cost!) but I was still bamboozled by the theft. If only it hadn’t occurred I wouldn’t have faced the pain and shame.

When we got home mother tasked Gugu and Mandla to fetch and catch a fowl for Kuga an exercise they thoroughly enjoyed executing. Meanwhile Kuga’s parents revealed that they had decided to sponsor me on condition that I pass my examinations well. Kuga had done all the homework about where our home was and how to get there and they had planned to get home when results came out to inform me about this. The three then bid us farewell and drove off. After they had traveled for about a hundred meters they suddenly stopped and reversed, to our anxiety and puzzlement. *Did they want to apologize and tell me that they didn’t real mean to sponsor me?*

‘I have a confession to make...’ Kuga announced. ‘I stole your uniform. Those rags were threatening to fall off anytime and as your friend I couldn’t just watch... Till next term!’

The Initiation

By
Mika Nyoni

The figure in the wheelchair looked familiar even from a distance of about 50 metres. As I approached I realized who it was and my heart started pounding increasing in intensity with each step I took. Although I was in my sixties I still had the ability of those half my age, I believed. As I neared the figure looked in my direction quizzically for a moment before giving me the familiar half sneer and half smile stretching his two arms in greeting. Propelled by the drums of adrenalin in my system I flew to him, grabbed him by the collar with my left and with my right slapped him across the face. The impact left him sprawling face down quite a distance from his overturned wheelchair. I was about to mete out some more punishment on him when I was restrained by the sizeable crowd which had come to witness the altercation between two gray haired men in the middle of town.

'Mati harahwa idzi ndidzo dzanga dzichigwa?' A very young policeman who had just arrived on a bicycle said a mixture of disbelief and amusement splashed all over his face before struggling to give us a stern warning for disturbing the peace of our surroundings and riding off.

After passing my primary school leaving examinations with flying colours both my parents were over the moon with excitement. In fact for some time father went around with my result slip in his pocket bragging to and taunting his drinking partners:

'Look at how some man's children are worth...I don't blame the poor little fellows...If you get oxen or cows the size of an undernourished goat do you curse the poor animals or the bull responsible?' he would taunt them.

Fed up with the barrage of taunts Chikwepa one day returned fire:

'Yes you might have this super son of yours who's overflowing with brains but brains alone aren't enough. Unemployed as you are what will you use to pay the fees- clay pots? Mice? Lice? This drought and that boy's fees will wipe off the few calves and foals you still have and there's no guarantee the boy will have real useful life brains after turning your whole clan and that of your in-laws into real paupers!'

This real hurt him at first but spurred him on.

'I want to prove the likes of Chikwepa wrong. My son will go to the mission. If it means staying in the bush I will, if it means selling all cows and donkeys, so be it'

‘But Baba Siphon the rest of the children and us need to continue living after the boy has gone to school’, mother protested.

‘Siphon is the eldest and the future head of the family. If he decides to squander this chance of this branch of the family to be called people among people it’s up to him but he’ll live with that weighing down his neck-I’ll have washed mine like Pilate.’

‘Amen. You sound like a veteran preacher. Let those who have ears hear. It pays for the servant to also take heed when the prince is being counselled-I hope you two are not sitting on your ears!’ she said to my young brother and sister.

From this day I noticed a marked change in father. He drank much less, went hunting for any opportunity to get an extra cent and was quieter.

The last few days of the school holidays were the busiest for both my parents. I felt somehow guilty for the trouble I was letting them go through. It seemed everything else was being sacrificed for me. Even my baby sister, Gugu’s speech, like the elders’ almost always had some reference to my going to boarding school. Even the fowl I was to carry to school was put in a cage and put on a separate diet to rid it of the kwashiorkor induced by the marauding drought according to mother.

The eve of my departure was even busier. Mother dressed the chicken extra-carefully and only removed the insides and peripherals such as the feet, head and neck, which the whole family of five partook as relish. The bulk of the chicken was carefully roasted on a carefully tended fire. After she was satisfied she put it aside and only supplied it with just enough heat to allow excess fat to drip leisurely into the fire. She then turned to the soup, which she later put in a plastic bottle. She put the rice in a winnowing basket and meticulously rid it of any uncrushed grains or tiny stones, if any still remained. This was perhaps the third or fourth round and knowing my mother as I do, just one session is good enough but she was at her best. The rice was carefully measured as well as the corresponding number of cups of water and put in a clay pot, which was then put in one corner of the stand on top of the fire. Next she put the large zinc sheet, which acted as our pan on top of the fire on the stand next to the clay pot to roast peanuts. After roasting one batch she would transfer it into a basin, sprinkle some salt-the right amount of salt before sprinkling the right amount of water and mixing. About two kilogrammes of peanuts were prepared this way and put aside for cooling and eventual packaging. Next she prepared mutakura, my favourite.

‘I had to keep this for this special occasion’, noticing my obvious surprise she remarked.

‘But this is January and the harvesting was in May last year. I hadn’t even written my mid-years!’

'I knew you'd pass, son. I mightn't have seen a school's door but that doesn't prevent me from seeing with my inner eyes. As for the monkey nuts, with their shells on they can be kept for a very long time without going bad', she developed her thesis.

'But...but the season was bad. We got almost nothing...'

'You're right. We got almost nothing compared to what we normally get. But almost nothing is not nothing. This should teach you not to be a crybaby, not to thrive on excuses in life. It's going to be tough out there and you'll have lots of good excuses for not making it. But excuses are like painkillers providing just temporary relief. Go there and shine in spite of everything thrust in your way from whatever source...By the way I also have enough for the planting season this year in case the current crop fails!'

I was too moved to say anything else.

Next came the packaging and more surprises. Besides the one set of school uniforms, which I knew she had bought, she also had bought from an ex-student of the school another set of shorts and shirts and... a blazer! All of the clothing items were a size or two bigger.' You're still growing up. These will give us a chance to breathe while we look for others' she had read my mind and answered the question written on it. This she said while adjusting the waistline of the short I was wearing with needle and thread.

I heard someone opening the gate and craned my neck to check and slumped back onto the stool dumbfounded.

'Aren't you going to be courteous enough to relieve your father of the load he has carried all the way from Mapirimira?After all it's your parcel..'mother taunted enjoying the surprise I had displayed.

I went out and took the bicycle from father whose face was shimmering from the heavy perspiration. On the bicycle's carrier was a school trunk, my trunk! On it was neatly printed my name and school. It might have had lumps under its shimmering black skin but it was my trunk. It might have had, in its long life, changed several hands but it was now my trunk. It might have undergone some extensive rehabilitative surgery but it was now my trunk. No, it was our trunk. I was going to keep it well-not to add to the scars it obviously had still visible underneath its black coat. Farai and Gugu and perhaps some down and out lad or lass would one day need it. As bonsella the former owner had given me a few textbooks and had written me a short missive:

Dear Siph

Congratulations for passing so well and getting a place at one of a very few schools accessible to our people. You might find the following textbooks useful.

Ndhlovu ,M.

P.S. Sorry I was so excited I forgot to introduce myself! I'm Ndhlovu Mandla. Attended your new school before you were born and currently an Education Inspector.

The following day all of us woke up very early in the morning to prepare for the journey. The whole family escorted me to the bus stop about 5 kilometres away. The trunk was strapped on the bicycle carrier ridden by father while mother carried the satchel. As the escortee I did not carry anything. Seven year old Gugu and my ten year old brother Farai insisted on escorting *bhudhi* Siphos as well.

'I believe everyone who no longer has milk on his nose knows what is wrong and what is right. You'll meet many boys and girls from all over the country. Remain true to yourself. *Ungabi uthathekhile!*' father gave me his last piece of advice as the bus was heard rumbling in the distance. Each word was deliberately slowly articulated for emphasis.

'Go well, son. As your father says don't just drift with the wind. It's not wise to let yourself be blown away by the wind because you don't know its agenda and destination! Go well, son and write us as soon as you get there'.

I boarded the bus and found a seat somewhere near the front. I did not realize that I had been standing up my teary eyes glued on the four waving silhouettes now almost engulfed by an avalanche of dust until my seat-mate, a man of about 60 brought me back from the reverie by shaking me and saying gently:

'It's pretty hard to leave your family especially for the first time...Don't despair you'll get used to it. It's only a school and not a prison!' I was still wondering how he got to know about my leaving home for the first time when he continued:

'But older pupils, especially boys can really be nasty. Don't lose heart it'll only be the initiation. Can you imagine running away from being born? Can I stop this hair from graying or these wrinkles from forming? I tried but where am I today?...Have a nice journey ,my friend. Let me prepare to alight at the next bus stop...Remember to fear only He who can destroy both body and soul'.

I was puzzled by what the enigmatic old man had said to me. It made a lot of sense but I did not understand it. Could the old man be mad? Nasty older boys? Running away from being born? I

was still trying to make sense of what he had said when I read the sign: 'Welcome to Nyamazondo Mission'.

I was so much engrossed in my thoughts that I did not realize that about half the passengers were school pupils. Some bigger boys climbed up the bus to assist in offloading the shimmering black trunks from the roof of the bus while the rest of us surrounded the bus receiving them regardless of whom the owner was like ants we often observed while herding cattle co-operatively carrying loads disproportionate to their size. What camaraderie! The power of numbers! How wrong the old man was!

We then took our respective pieces of luggage and were escorted by older boys to the Boarding Master who then allocated us dormitories after ensuring from our receipts that we had indeed paid everything expected of us. The dormitories were large blocks almost as large as our primary school classrooms –in fact they resembled hospital wards except that our wards had bunk beds. In each dormitory were ten such beds and I was allocated an upper one. Though I wasn't comfortable with this I did not voice my concern. When the B.M. left for another dormitory two of my dorm mates had some misunderstanding on who was to use the upper bed. It was hushed and menacing. There was some suppressed pushing and shoving and I suspect I was the only other student who really paid attention to it. I quickly offered mine to both pugilists' astonishment. I could not imagine sleeping about one and half metres off the ground. At home Farai and I shared a reed mat and the two blankets. Quite often we would wake up metres away from our mat each one of us wrapped into a ball in his own blanket. Before a hut specifically built for the boys was built we used to sleep in the kitchen. One day we woke up to find our top blanket aflame. We had apparently strayed in our sleep into the fire which had been left alight to provide extra warmth in the middle of winter. This is the reason why I did not consider the upper bed the better of the two options for me bearing in mind my sleeping record.

The policy of the school was that no meals were served on the day of arrival. Students were expected to eat what they would have brought from home or bought on the way. So we were in no hurry to unpack and make our beds. In fact most of us prioritized going to the shower first. I did this out of curiosity and to learn vicariously from dorm mates.

There was loud banging at our dormitory door and all of us looked puzzled and enquiringly in that direction. Then an army of about fifteen boys marched into our dorm.

'Silence, I say!' one of them shouted although there was dead silence.

'May I, dear grade sevens, sorry, form ones, introduce you to the honourable principal', he continued pointing to one tall boy who had painted his face to resemble some beard and a moustache. Some white stuff had been applied onto his hair to give an impression of about 50% grey hair. The crown looked at least forty five but the visage unfortunately betrayed this looking

at most eighteen. He looked very serious-this was exacerbated by his naturally pimpleful skin and highly pronounced facial furrows which ran horizontally across his forehead. When the principal's spokesperson completed his introduction all of us could not help but burst laughing. The boy nearest the invaders was slapped across the face by one of the principal's hangers-on. This effectively silenced all of us who spontaneously looked from side to side heads bowed as if saying : 'Is this happening and are you also a witness to this?'

'I'm sure you applied for places to the headmaster. This learned man I'm privileged to introduce and whose tie I am unfit to adjust, is the principal. Your ancient, dilapidated, and emaciated headmaster reports to your principal, this humble unassuming man of letters...Sir, you may address your people'

By now we were thoroughly confused. What was the difference between a headmaster and a principal? Could that be the principal-the boy with whitened hair and painted face? Why were they in school uniform? Perhaps the principal wore the uniform to identify with the rest of us. But why did he have to put on some disguise? I was very clear on one thing-I did not like this principal and his officers.

'All protocol observed', he bellowed. 'My speech will be very brief: I'm a very busy man, time is money. Many are presently waiting for me elsewhere. I wish to welcome you all to this our institution. For it to be yours as well you need to pay some affiliation fee in cash or kind or both. All this is part of the initiation ceremony. *Toda kukutemerai nyora dzepano paNyamazondo*. I'll sadly be leaving this institution at the end of this year after six years of loyal service', he paused to give his officers the opportunity to solemnly nod in appreciation and agreement before continuing, 'but I wish to leave a mark, a legacy no other has. This tradition should not be let to die', he again paused to sternly survey the confused and frightened faces before him. In fact as his eyes swept across the room our eyes avoided the gaze.

'Earlier I talked about affiliation. May you unlock your trunks before my officers come to look for the said affiliation...I declare the initiation ceremony officially open!'

What the old man had said to me in the bus became crystal clear. These were the nasty boys and the initiation was a ploy to deprive us of every morsel of food we had brought. I found myself instinctively shouting: 'No!' How could I allow them to ransack my trunk and satchel and take away everything my mother had so painstakingly prepared without a fight? All of a sudden they halted in their tracks in disbelief.

'Halt your search!' he bellowed advancing to where I was.' Let me deal with this scum first' whose nostrils had emitting hot air in quick gasps

Breathing deep down into my face, his squint-eyes unsmiling, little droplets of perspiration forming on his dome-shaped nose whose flared nostrils were emitting hot air in quick gasps.

‘Open your damn trunk!’ he ordered. I stared up in his face. I could not open the trunk to let him loot my food. I’d rather have him force his way. That would give me solace.

‘I said open your damn trunk!’ he repeated stamping his foot each time he uttered a word. The combination of the husky and hysterical voice and the stamping of the foot leaving my hair on their very toes and my eardrum sounding like a siren. The trunk was unlocked but the lid was on. His majesty wanted to savour the pleasure of the subject doing it on his behalf-that would water his thirsty ego.

‘I won’t!’ I declared.

‘I’ve not killed anyone during my reign here but this mosquito wants to die in my hands. Let this cup pass, Oh Lord! I won’t enjoy the meal if I succumb to the temptation to wring this giraffey neck’, he said bending down to open my trunk upon which I summoned all my strength and kicked him in the face. The principal was prevented from falling on his back by some alert officer. What I remember is the principal advancing and pointing threateningly at me blood flowing freely from his mouth. Kuga later filled me up with the details-under the commandantship of the principal his officers had beaten me senseless, ransacked only my trunk and satchel and eaten up everything which mother had packed.

‘Why?’ I asked, surprised.

‘The fight stole the steam out of them plus you had enough food to feed the whole battalion!’

My dorm mates then brought out their food and we had some party thanking me for the revolutionary stance I had taken. On my part I didn’t enjoy the food that much since my whole body ached. Though I enjoyed the attention during the party and the fame afterwards, I still felt hurt. It was not just about the issue about well-prepared food but the trampling with impunity of other people’s feelings. This is why 52 years later I acted the way I did when I saw Bongwi.