

He stood with me at the checkpoint where the coiled razor wire gave way to the opening at the road. I looked down the road and across the field, back the way I had come. I felt paralyzed. *I can't go back that way. I'm bound to meet those taxi drivers.* I looked at the battalion of soldiers patrolling the outer perimeter of the wire and those bunched together by their hippos at the entrance just ten yards away from where we stood. I told myself that I couldn't spend the night in Phola Park because there was no way to let Khanya know where I was; after our fight that morning she would be worried. It was a charitable rationalization that let me off the hook from having to think of myself as someone who would do anything to remove himself from the threat the people around me faced every night.

It was getting late. The sun was slowly setting. My shoes, my brightly polished wingtips, were caked on the bottom with mud or feces. On a patch of grass beside the wire I did what I could to clean them. The comrade was waiting patiently for me to announce my departure. His ubuntu kept him from being the first to depart.

"The weapons, the one's brought in from the Transkei—did they find our DLBs?"

"No," he smiled, "they'll never find them. You can tell Thabo and Stimela the weapons are safe."

"Good. Well, I...I guess I should be going?"

"Travel safely, com."

"Is there some other way back to Jo'burg," I said looking down the road and across the field.

"Isn't that the way you came?"

"Yes, but you see...It's...I had a spot of trouble on the way."

"Oh, I see."

"I'm not armed and I don't know the territory. I'd be lost in the dark."

"You can spend the night here. In the morning we can organize some comrades to escort you."

*This place won't be here in the morning.*

Then, a mile or so down the road; I spotted a caravan of shiny BMWs, approaching the checkpoint. Two large oil tankers trailed in the dust that billowed behind them.

"Not petrol," said my friend, smiling, "water. Winnie Mandela is bringing us water."

The armored hippos that stood at the checkpoint crunched and groaned as they turned around and went out to block the caravan's advance. They stopped the lead car fifty yards or so from the checkpoint area. The commanding officer, a lieutenant colonel, climbed out of one of the

hippos and walked over to the first car. Winnie Mandela rolled down her backseat window. The words they exchanged could not be heard. But their demeanors seemed tense though reserved. The C.O. told the soldiers to reverse the hippos enough to let the cars pass. Then, as the cars came forward, he commanded them to close ranks again so that the water carriers could *not* pass. The four BMWs swooped into the checkpoint area. Winnie Mandela and an entourage of four women from the first two cars and one driver, who was also a bodyguard, entered Phola Park without pausing to be searched or questioned at the opening in the razor wire. They walked past us and nodded or greeted us earnestly, but without stopping. They then went to Phola Park's tiny ANC Branch headquarters where several members of the local executive committee met them on the steps. I recognized one of the drivers as an Umkhonto we Sizwe operative whom I had once seen Jabu Mosando speaking with. From this I concluded that all four of the drivers must be MK as well.

Peter Mokaba was in the backseat of the car that Winnie had been riding in. He was the President of the ANC Youth League and an MK soldier of some note (though his high public image had more than likely forced him to lessen his role in the latter capacity). It is said that in 1988, he fought valiantly with the MPLA and ten thousand Cubans in Angola at the Battle of Cuito Canavale; the battle which crippled UNITA and the South African Army; the battle that led to the settlement in Angola, to the demoralization of South Africa's standing army, and to widespread resistance by young White conscripts like my students at Wits.

The women in Winnie Mandela's entourage were leading members of the ANC Women's League, a wing of the ANC whose first president and founding member was a Black American woman Madie Hall-Xuma, the wife Dr. A. B. Xuma, who was President of the ANC in the 1940s. Like Mrs. Hall-Xuma, I too had followed my spouse to South Africa and had been swept away by the events of the time, though not at the commanding heights Madie Hall had known.

The ANC Women's League entourage that entered Phola Park that afternoon, fifty years after Mrs. Hall-Xuma had presided over the League's first meeting, were neither young nor old, they all appeared to be in their forties and fifties. They were dressed in bright and richly colored traditional garb, replete with splendid head wraps. Two of the women remained outside the building. The other two and the bodyguard went inside with Winnie Mandela.

I asked the two women who remained outside if I could ride back to town with them. They told me that they didn't know who I was. That I could be anyone. I told them I was with the

Regional Office. They said, “No,” and something like only authorized people were allowed to ride in those cars. I was so frantic trying to get my ANC membership card out of my wallet that I spilled a number of other cards on the ground. I gathered them in the darkness and held out my Minnesota driver’s license by mistake. They were underwhelmed.

“Sorry. Here’s my membership card.” They considered it as though it was a little more legit than a Mouseketeer’s Club Card, but a ride was still not on offer “I am on the Executive Committee there, you can ask Stephanie Kemp—Albie Sach’s ex-wife; and her son, Michael Sachs.” One of them nodded in recognition of the name, but a ride was still not on offer. “And Janet Love.” Everyone knew Janet Love because she was an MK operative who had been captured during Operation Vula; a bold mission to smuggle huge quantities of arms into the country in 1990. She was a White woman who lived in Parktown and worked in the ANC Parktown Branch with Nadine Gordimer. She was now head of the five person ANC Sub-Regional Executive Committee. “I’ve been seconded to the Sub-Regional Executive Committee as well. She’ll vouch for me.” I kept pulling more rabbits out of my hat. “And I work for the Regional Peace Commission. They sent me out here today.”

“Why can’t they transport you to town?”

“I’m on my own. I don’t have a car.”

“How did you get here?”

“By taxi. From there.” I pointed to the veld beyond the road and the tiny houses further on, emptied of all inhabitants by that morning’s massacre. “I can’t go back there.”

“Where in town do you live?”

“Braamfontein. Across the street from Wits.”

“We can’t ferry you to Braamfontein!”

“I’ll get off in Kensington or Jeppestown. Anywhere in town.”

“We’re going to Shell House.”

“That’s even better. I can get a taxi at Noord Street...please.”

I heard loud, angry, talk and commotion coming from the clearing, the checkpoint beyond the wire. I’d been vaguely aware of it all along but too caught up in my pleading with the two women from the ANC Women’s League to pay it any mind. Now, it was too vitriolic to be ignored. I hurried back to the razor wire and asked the young man what was happening.

“The Boers are insulting comrades. Trying to intimidate them. Comrades are getting furious, com.”

“How did it start?”

“Like it always starts.”

Soldiers on foot had converged on the first two BMWs. They were pointing their rifles at the window of both cars. Some of them were in front where they trained their guns on the windshield. Others were at the sides. They were yelling curses and insults at the passengers, primarily in Afrikaans with only a phrase here and there of English.

Throughout all of this, Peter Mokaba, who was seated in the front seat of the lead sedan, was matching the soldiers' insults and expletives measure for measure—but he cursed in English. Without knowing what we were doing—I certainly did not know what I was doing—the young man and I found ourselves walking through the opening in the wire. I drifted, as though floating in ether, over to Peter Mokaba's car. Mokaba was now out of his car. He wore a suit, dark blue like mine, but his shoes were sleek, Italian, far more sophisticated than my wingtips caked with mud or feces. With their rifles in his face they ordered him back into the vehicle.

“Voetsek!” he said. “We can shoot too. You know we can shoot. We shot back at Cuito Canavale! One day we'll shoot back here.”

They barked at him repeatedly. I simply stood next to him, trying to maintain my balance for my legs were uncertain. I took care not to make any movement that would get me shot as I put my hand on the hood of the car and tried to steady myself. The hippos that were back a ways, blocking the passage of the water trucks, lumbered back into position. The gun ports slid open and barrels were extended from them. I saw one of the women I had asked for a ride scurrying up the steps of the small shed where Winnie Mandela was meeting with the Branch Executive committee.

“Yesss, you know we can shoot back, don't you,” Mokaba yelled.

I felt nauseous and dizzy standing there next to Mokaba. There was yelling and pandemonium coming from so many directions and, with the sun setting behind them, it was hard to see the expressions on the faces of any of the soldiers except the two or three that stood directly in front of and closest to us. All I could see of the other soldiers were their silhouettes, which made their voices seem transcendent and disembodied. But there was also a hint of apprehension in their voices—both fearless and terrified. The soldiers inside and beside the hippos had been calling Peter Mokoba a kaffir. Now, one of the soldiers who held us at gunpoint called him one as well.

“Stop your nonsense, kaffir!” He spat the words into our faces.

This seemed *not* to enrage Peter Mokaba but to energize him. His cavalier demeanor expanded and he pushed the barrel of the rifle out of his face. The soldier went berserk. He

screamed obscenities and thrust the rifle at Mokaba as though he had a bayonet on the end. *It's like a firing squad.* That was all I could think. *We're facing a firing squad. I don't want to die. No there. Not like this.* Peter went on with his repartee about the Battle of Cuito Canavale. I didn't know how much more of this the young conscript could take. Whether he lived on dirt farm in the Karoo or whether, like my students at Wits, he lived in the tree-lined tranquility of Parktown where his nanny followed him from room to room picking up after him, I could not tell. His rage had transcended class. One thing was certain, he had never been spoken to this way by an African. Peter Mokaba was forcing him to encounter a battle from a war he might not have even fought in, but one whose defeat he had surely inherited; for it had been tethered to the army's institutional memory. What kind of rejoinder was available to this young man; what was *his* claim to fame? The grandmother whose hand he mutilated? The man whose collar bone he broke with his rifle butt? Those doors behind him that will not close? He could shoot this kaffir dead. That would shut him up. But he couldn't finish the war of words that he and his squadron had started.

I did not see Winnie Mandela leave the meeting. I did not see her walk down the four or five stairs or approach the razor wire and enter the clearing of the checkpoint. I simply turned and she was there, making her way quickly and cautiously through the throng of soldiers. As she made her way, the lieutenant colonel emerged from somewhere near the hippos and barked an order which was immediately repeated by the command sergeant. All of the soldiers seemed to lower their rifles. *Where has this joker been all this time?*

I am not completely certain what happened next. I had lost my capacity to concentrate. Winnie Mandela must have said something to Peter Mokaba. If I heard it I either don't remember it or she spoke in Xhosa. Then, I remember seeing her and the lieutenant colonel somewhere near the hippos, speaking with one another. The women whom I had been speaking with and the ones from inside the meeting, filed past me to their cars. "Come," one of them said as she passed.

I sat in the back seat. I was trembling. I put my knuckles to my mouth. The woman beside me gently lowered my hand to the seat. "Not now," she said, "later."

The hippos made enough room for the water trucks to pass. Their long silver cylinders rolled past my window and into Phola Park. Lined along the razor wire the dark twilight residents watched. No one cheered. *It isn't over. It never is.*