

JUST A TSOTSI

J. ARTHUR MAIMANE

It was hot. The sun shone straight down on the flat acres of mealies. The green dazzled the eye, in a shimmer that made it difficult to make out one plant from the next.

They came running through the plants, bursting through the green haze, laughing and panting. They jumped into the stream, feet first, cooling off their naked, baked soles in the water.

Then they sat down, still panting, leaning against the rough bark of the tree. Hot little fingers dug into the clay, wriggling luxuriously in the yielding coolness of the clay.

"What are you going to make, Kleinbaas?"

"Oxen. Big, fat and strong oxen—like my father's."

"With long, curving horns—sharp ones?"

"And with soft, glossy skins. . . . And you?"

"A car. Big, shining and beautiful—like the one the Baas bought after the last harvest. . . . Like the car I'll buy after I have worked in the city and become a rich man."

"Kaffirs can never get rich—anywhere! Look at your brother. He's been all these years in the city—and he does not even own a bicycle. Just gets cheekier, my father says!"

"Because he does not work hard enough! That's what my father told my mother. I heard him. I will work hard."

"And my father says all kaffirs who go to the cities become bad. They become too clever—and rude too. He does not like your brother. Why do you want to go? When I'm big, I'll be the Baas here. I'll have a fine time!"

"But my brother says the city is the place for all of us to go to. There, he says, we can have meat three times a week. There we can all get rich——"

"Nonsense!"

Their little fingers worked, fashioning the clods of clay into their day-dreams. The talk ended abruptly; but the fingers did not seem to have noticed. They flew on. Two pink tongues were held tightly between two sets of teeth.

"Kleinbaas, why does the Ou Missus call you Piet?"

"Because it's my name, you silly!"

"Then why must I—and my father too—call you Kleinbaas?"

"Because my father is the Baas, and I am his son."

"But why——"

"What's wrong with you to-day, Klaasie? You are a funny sort of kaffertjie! I never thought you had so many questions in your head!"

Piet started on his fourth ox, working fast and effortlessly; toes dug into the cool earth and head held to one side. He stopped for the first time since they had started, and lifted up his head to look at the other tilted head.

"You and I—we are friends, nê Kleinklaas?"

"Yes. We are friends."

"We have been friends for as long as we can remember, nê?"

"How long is that?"

"I don't know. . . . Let me see, I'm eight years old, now. You too, isn't it—I bet you wouldn't know! Anyway, there you are—we've been friends for eight whole years! We could be twins, if you weren't black."

"Yes."

"My cousin Gert tells me—you know him, the son of Baas Gert on the farm over there. Well, my cousin Gert, he reads big books—he goes to school at the big school in Pretoria—and he told me that one of his books says there are men over the sea who, when they are very good friends, like you and I, mix their blood!"

"Mix their blood? How?"

"Easy—if you are not a coward. They make cuts on the insides of their wrists, and then hold the cuts together. The blood from one man flows into the other. You see?"

"Shoo! That must be painful, nê?"

"Ag, you afraid of just a little pain? We must do it too—then we will be blood brothers for ever and ever."

"What will the Ou Missus say, when you get home with blood and cuts? You know she always gets angry when you are hurt; then she hits me."

"Don't worry about me, ou neef! This will be our secret—nobody else must know about it. Reg?"

"I haven't got a knife."

"I've got one—here!"

He pulled his faded khaki shirt out of his faded khaki pants, undid his fly, and showed his friend a sheath knife tied around his middle with a leather thong. The knife was new and shone in the sun. His initials had been roughly cut into the bone handle.

"Ooooh . . . what a nice knife! Where did you get it?"

"Cousin Gert brought it for me from Pretoria. He said I must never show it to my mother or father—they would tell him off. That's why I keep it like this. Now, let's go ahead!"

"But isn't it too big to make such a small cut?"

"You've got to know how to use it, that's all. I know how to use it—like the doctors in the big hospitals when they cut open sick people. Now give me your arm—the left one, I think."

With his tongue sticking out tightly at the corner of his mouth, Piet made a neat incision on the inside of the wrist.

"There—klaar!" he gasped proudly.

The black eyelids fluttered open and the eyes turned from the burning sky to examine the slightly bleeding cut.

"Hey—it wasn't so painful, after all!"

"I told you. Now to make my cut."

"Give me the knife."

"Naw. You don't know how. I'll do it myself. Safer."

Slowly and tensely the blade descended on the wrist of his left arm, which was held tightly against his body to keep it from shaking. The knife hand was shaking slightly from the concentrated effort to keep it steady. The blade touched the skin and jerked slightly. The first globule of blood appeared.

A horse neighed sharply and rattled its bit, a big voice hollered—"What are you two skelms up to now?"

The knife hand jerked forward, then backwards across the wrist. The blood spurted.

"Einaaaah!" Piet wailed, looking round and across the stream to where his father sat on his horse. The eyes swivelled back to the wrist where the blood was jerking.

The horse splashed across the stream and Johannes Petrus Wessels jumped off to kneel near his frightened son.

"Where in the devil did you get this murderous knife—and just what could you have been doing to cut yourself like that?"

The black boy cowered against the tree, his own cut forgotten, and his eyes held by the fury and anxiety of the big man who was deftly making a tourniquet with a strip of cloth torn from Piet's shirt.

Only after he had bandaged the wrist did Wessels take his attention from his son to glare at the black boy as he lifted Piet in his arms.

"You no-good swartvel!" he hissed. "This is more of your

devilish work, hey? You wait until I come back to the groothuis from the doctor—I'll whip your stinking black hide off your back, that's what I'll do! I don't know why I ever allowed Piet to play with a savage like you. Weg is jy, klonkie!"

The big horse galloped off. The black boy snatched the bloody knife out of the grass and scurried home.

The Ou Baas did not whip him that night. Ou Niklaas, angry at his son for bringing on the Ou Baas's frightening fury, knelt and pleaded on the stoep of the groothuis, proffering a sjambok with which he begged the baas to thrash him, instead of his son.

"My kaffertjie is still too small for such punishment, my baas, my kroon en my koning. Give the thrashing to your Ou Niklaas, who has never failed to obey your wishes."

Wessels softened and roughly told the old man to go.

"But don't let me see that little savage of yours on my farm again, Niklaas, d'you hear? Take him away—anywhere—tonight—and all will be well between us," he said. "Now stop snivelling like an old woman and get him off, you old fool!"

Before the boy was borne away that night, his father relieved himself of the evening's fear and tension by giving him a sound thrashing, while his wife cursed him for a man who was too cowardly to defend his son, but instead did the white man's filthy work for him.

The old woman had to carry the youngest of her sons on her back when they left that night. His leg muscles were still stiff and sore from the thrashing with a riempie, and he could not walk.

She carried him for ten miles to her sister's home, near the railway siding. In the morning she would take the boy to his married sister in Alexandra Township. The boy would get to the city of his dreams earlier than he had ever thought.

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It was hot. The room was like an oven filled with roasting, sweating black bodies, presided over by a white uniformed man behind the deal counter. The roast spilt out and into the police station's courtyard with its coal-hot, roughly cobbled ground.

Four white policemen leaned against their rifles on the cooler veranda, lazily watching sixteen sweating and cursing black constables pushing, slapping, cursing and kicking the overflow

into some kind of order. But the constables didn't seem to know what kind of order they wanted. They had been jabbing batons into backs and stomachs for four hours now.

"Hell, but those constables have got energy," Piet said casually. "And fancy doing all that to their own people."

"If it wasn't for this blasted heat, I'd be out there helping them," a short, pug-nosed, bulky young constable said, cold eyes squinting into the glare of the court-yard. He tilted his cap a little forward.

"I was bloody disappointed this morning," he went on. "My first raid—and nothing happens!"

"What did you expect to find, Hannes?" a tall, thin corporal—the oldest of the four—asked with amusement all over his sallow face.

"Well, I don't know exactly," Hannes replied. "But I had hoped something would happen."

"Who was your rifle instructor, Hannes?" the corporal asked quietly. "I expect it was Oelofse—telling all the students to imagine the target they were lining their sights on was a kaffir! I know him. We started together."

"He wasn't so bad, Oom," Hannes replied. "There was that other chap—what was his name, Piet?—who had notches on his gun for every swartvel he had killed; he'd been in a few riots." "I don't remember his name," Piet said, scratching the back of his neck. "I didn't like him—he was too much of a bloody show-off. Like you, Hannes."

"So this was the first raid for you two young cowboys, hey?" the fourth policeman, who had been standing some distance off, said as he came nearer. He was a handsome, medium-sized man, with a thick black moustache.

"Don't be in such a hurry for a riot, my boy," he went on. "Because these kaffirs are not always as submissive as they look now. Just remember this, Johannes my boy; remember this the next time you hope for a riot: those bloody bastards can shoot back too. You won't feel so brave when they start firing at you from out of the dark in those locations!"

He gave a short, nasty laugh.

"Now, don't scare the boys, Gert," the corporal said mildly.

Hannes forced out a laugh. "That kind of talk doesn't scare me, Oom. Maybe it scares Piet," he added, looking slyly at Piet. "I know him—every time he starts massaging that scar on his wrist I know he's nervous!"

"I'm *not* scared of any kaffirs," Piet retorted, "but I wish you'd all stop talking about shooting them as if they were game. Why don't you go somewhere and be a big-game hunter, if you're such a good shot, Hannes?"

Johannes forced himself to join in the laughter of the two older policemen.

The black mass took the proddings, curses, slaps and kicks without any resistance. Only their eyes showed the smouldering hate they felt towards their tormentors, who were doing their best to show what conscientious workers they were.

"I know that fat swine," a young boy murmured to the man next to him after he had been pushed. "He lives in Seventh Avenue. We'll fix him, one of these nights!"

Some in the mass looked with envy and trepidation at those men who walked out of the charge office free. One would see an acquaintance, and shout a message to be delivered at home or at work before the nearest constable could stop him.

"Who wants to phone his boss?" one of the constables was saying as he walked round the men. "Half-a-crown and I'll do it for you. Or you want to lose your jobs?"

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"Hey! Buya lapha, jou nonsons! Come back here," the fat black constable shouted as he waddled after a young boy who was running towards the stoep where the four white policemen were standing.

The boy dodged past another policeman and came onto the veranda in front of Johannes, his eyes big with fright. Hannes jumped back as the boy agitatedly grabbed at him and started babbling: "Please, baasie! I've never been in jail—don't want to ever go there—I'm a good boy, baasie—my pass is at home—under my pillow, baasie. They arrested me as I was going to the lavatory—never gave me a chance to go and get it—please baasie, help me. I—"

Gert's fist stopped the babbling as it smashed into the quivering mouth. "Weg is jy, kaffir!" he grated as the boy fell back into the arms of the fat constable. "Take your dirty hands off the baasie—and stay away!"

The stunned boy was led away by the scruff of his shirt.

"The cheeky bastard," Gert said, a smile on his handsome face as he rubbed his knuckles. "He had you scared for a minute, hey, Hannes?"

They laughed and Johannes turned red.

"Hey, you bleksem!" the fat constable half-wailed, half-shouted as the boy with the swollen mouth started running again—away from the crowd and towards the gates.

"Now he's asking for trouble," Hannes said, seeing a chance to vindicate himself. With one fluid motion he grabbed his rifle from where it was leaning against the wall and fell down on one knee. "He won't be cheeky any more, after this!"

He fired deliberately low, the bullet hitting the ground between the running boy's legs and ricocheting at an angle with a whine. The boy yelped and ran faster.

"Don't kill him, Hannes!" the corporal said in a low, tight voice.

Hannes laughed. "This is what I've been waiting for!"

His next shot whined close by the boy's ear. With another frightened yelp the boy crouched down and started running zig-zag fashion. He had almost reached the gate now. He straightened up to grab at the gate post and swing round it.

Hannes grinned and fluidly shifted his rifle to the hand holding the post. He fired two quick shots, smashing the hand with the first and hitting the boy's head with the second as it came round and above the post.

The satisfied grin came off his face as a rough hand grabbed the rifle from his cheek and threw it down. He looked up into the red, angry face of the charge sergeant, who had rushed out at the sound of the shots.

"You—you!" the sergeant gasped. "What do you think you're doing!"

"The boy was trying to escape, sergeant," Gert said easily. "Hannes here fired two warning shots first—like the regulations say."

The sergeant hardly heard this. He was running towards the gate, with the four following behind. They ran past the mass of black faces without seeing any of them.

The black eyes were rivetted on the heap of rags that lay just outside the gate. There was a soft murmuring growl from somewhere inside the mass.

"Keep quiet, keep quiet," one of the constables said, the earlier harshness gone from his voice.

"Here, God, man! Must you shoot to kill?" the sergeant ranted when Constable Johannes de Villiers and the other three came up to the body. "You bloody fool! Shoot these bastards

in the leg, man! Now we'll have God-knows-who asking questions around here—and think of all the paper-work it means for me! You damn recruits will be wanting to shoot a white man one of these days!"

The sergeant went through the pockets of the boy. Piet looked on, his stomach slowly tightening as he examined the face of the dead boy.

"He's got nothing on him. Who the hell is he? What a lot of bother this is going to be!" the sergeant looked round angrily as he straightened up.

"Askies, Baas," the fat black constable said, waddling forward. "We got him in Seventh Avenue—he didn't have a pass. He's just a tsotsi—we found this on him."

The constable proffered a bone-handled hunting knife. The sergeant grabbed it, gave it one look and held it out to the constable. Piet seized it and examined it, his stomach a tight, sickening knot.

He bent down quickly and looked at the left wrist of the dead boy. He licked at his thumb and vigorously rubbed the inside of the wrist.

Then, slowly, he came to his feet. The initials "P.G.W." were still clear in the bone handle after ten years. "No wonder I never found the knife afterwards," he muttered as he walked away, ignoring the questions that were fired at him.

He looked at the jagged scar on the inside of his left wrist and walked away, massaging it.