

THE MOSQUITO

— A Short Story —

— MONGANE SEROTE

“YOU ARE overdoing it again,” Thula said.

“Brother,” Maluleke said with a sigh, “this is the last.”

“What is the time?”

Maluleke, slowly and casually, looked at his watch, sighed again before saying: “Twelf.”

“Are you sure you are coming with me?”

“What do you think?”

“You have to tell me, I don’t have to think about it.”

“You see,” Maluleke leaned forward, supporting his arms on the table, looking straight into Thula’s eyes, “I need not keep assuring you, or you need not keep asking, we come a long way you and I, besides, you know I love you, so...”

“The thing is, wishes will not help any of us, nor will they do the work.”

“That sounds profound my man,” Maluleke said, stood up, pulled his trousers up, almost staggered back, pushed the chair back and, without saying a word, walked towards the door. Thula followed him.

It was dark outside. Selbourne Street was deserted. Except for the barking dogs, and a lone sound of a car in the distant, the night was quiet. A cool breeze was blowing. Thula and Maluleke could hear their footsteps, sounding in the dark, stalking the quiet. Thula got into the driving seat. Maluleke, his hands in his pockets, his head bowed, stood next to the car, leaning against it. He sighed again. Then walked towards the back of the car, standing astride, his head still bowed, he

took out his gorge and began to urinate, one hand supporting him against the car. He burped. Thula started the car. For a while, Maluleke had problems zipping his trousers, then slowly, he walked around the car to the passenger seat. Thula engaged gear. The car moved slowly, then fast, and vanished into the night.

Thula got out of the car. He was walking quickly, across the street along Noord towards the bus terminus. He could hear a car, far away, roaring. He jumped over the railings at the bus terminus. He went past the huge rubbish bin. He leaned against one of the pillars.

Thula parked. Noord Street was deserted. Thula looked at Maluleke.

“Let me check, will you wait for me then?”

“What?”

“Wait for a while I will go to check then I will give you a sign.”

“Alright.”

Accross Union Square, the military barracks, a huge neon sign was winking red and white letters: After Action Satisfaction — Lexington Cigarettes. The white of the neon, which came after the red letters, which were followed by a blank, a darkness, seemed to illuminate everything around the huge board, and even beyond, across the steel fencing of Union Square. The white stripes, against the darkness of the board, disappeared in a slow rhythm, followed, slowly, by the red which soon took over the board: After Action

Satisfaction — Lexington Cigarettes.

Johannesburg, a city of tall shadows and windows staring like dark blank eyes, thousands of eyes, Johannesburg, when deserted at night seemed to be a city gone mad. The many neon lights, spoke to the empty streets. Far away, down towards Park Station, as if emerging out of the dark shadows: *Ebony — Black is Beautiful* — the blue letters said.

“Haai, have you been waiting long?”

“Two or so minutes,” Thula said, he could feel his heart heaving and sounding like a small thunder.

“Are you alone?”

“No, Maluleke is in the car.”

“Fetch him while I fetch the stuff,” the old man said and disappeared into the dark, to where he had come from. Thula retraced his steps towards the car:

After Action Satisfaction — Lexington Cigarettes.

Thula went past the rubbish bin. He was walking fast.

“Hey,” a voice said from behind the bin. Thula did not stop immediately but looked back, having slowed down his pace, and being watchful.

“Who is that?” he asked.

“My man, I am here,” Maluleke said, still leaning against the bin.

“When did you come here?”

“Now, I was beginning to fall asleep sitting there in the car, what’s happened to the timer?”

“He is fetching the stuff.”

“Oh, there he comes,” Maluleke said, and began to walk towards the direction where Thula had come. They met at the Men’s Toilets gate, which the timer unlocked. They walked down the stairs.

“Maluleke, you are not sober,” the timer said.

“Nor am I drunk,” Maluleke said.

“We shall see one day,” The timer said.

“Oh please don’t say that,” said Maluleke.

The old man unlocked and opened the door, they all filed inside.

“This will fit you, right?” the timer said, looking at Thula.

“Yes, it’s alright,” Thula said taking the overall.

“And these boots too.”

“Drunk, fit yourself into this and this,” the timer said throwing the black boots and a brown overall at Maluleke.

“Thank you,” Maluleke said.

“Now I want you to listen carefully,” the timer said, “Maluleke will push the cart, and you Thula will follow him holding a broom. Move very slowly, as you do so, keep your eyes on the barracks, there is a rhythm there. Watch it. If you see a man passing that is a sign that as soon as he disappears, you can take the stuff out and spread it across as you know. We have had to make it on brown paper and use red letters so that it does not show in the dark. It is now four-thirty, the first bus will be here in about thirty minutes or so, you must be away by then. Are we alright?”

“Yes, we are,” Maluleke said.

“I will go out first, push the cart into the street, soon as I come back, you two go out, and you Thula look towards the side of the station you will pick the man coming, he is on guard, don’t let him bother you, greet him, watch him and from then on you know what to do.”

“Alright,” Thula said.

“Now you should be through at about four-forty-five or so, a taxi will roll up at about that time, just leave the cart there where you are when it arrives, get into the car, you will be going to Faraday station, the man in the taxi will give you the details of how you go on there.” The timer went up the stairs.

“Ebony — Black is Beautiful — that is what you have to read when you get out here.”

“You saw that?”

“Yes, and I kept myself busy with — After Action Satisfaction — otherwise I would have fallen asleep,” Maluleke said.

“Oh, I did the same, it is still ringing in my head even now,” Thula said.

South Africa was startled in the morning. Support the people of Sekhukhuniland. They refused to be removed from their homes and they were shot. Stay at home from the 21st to the 23rd of March. So said the leaflets, the brown and red leaflets, which had, by the time South Africa woke up, been distributed in most of the major cities: in toilets, bus and train terminuses, the leaflets soon walked into factories, shops, everywhere where people

went, including the police stations.

Maluleke was coming back from the outside toilet when a young girl, first calling him, then running to him, handed him a brown and red leaflet.

"Where did you get this?" Maluleke asked. "Give it to someone else, uncle, pass it on", the little girl said and walked on. Maluleke watched the girl disappear around the corner of the house. He look-



ed around and saw a man hurrying to work. He called out to him, and hurried to meet him half-way.

"Someone gave this to me and said I should pass it on, do read and pass it on," Maluleke said.

"I saw that already", the man said and walked on.

"Okay," Maluleke said. He looked around, satisfied that the girl was nowhere to be seen, he dropped it to the ground and walked on.

"Where have you been?" Thula asked, "You missed the news, the radio sa..."

"Well let the radio say what it says, you will tell me what it said, I was still distributing the leaflet out there".

"What, wa...?"

"Yes, I got it from a girl who gave it to me and disappeared."

"The radio said nothing about the leaflets," Thula said.

"Well, in the streets the radio says everything is alright."

"Did someone give you the leaflet?"

"Yes, I met the red and brown paper, I was even asked to distribute it," Maluleke said.

"I don't know if I should believe you, you were drunk while at work, now you say these things," Thula shifted on the bed and faced the wall giving Maluleke his back.

"Tell me, what would your reason be for being in town that time of night, sober, tell me that?"

"It's wrong to be on duty and drunk, it's wrong I don't care what you say", Thula said angrily, he covered his head with the blankets.

Two days after Noord Street the timer, limping, from his aching old legs, his back bent from having knelt and scrubbed toilets in Johannesburg, since that time, so long ago, when he left Sekhukhuniland, the timer was sitting under a tree, with the chief of Sekhukhuniland, reporting to him the news of the cities.

"Our people in the towns have heard our



word, and have received it," the timer said. "I hear you," the chief said, putting his snuff tin into his shirt pocket.

"They received the word, and the word of their action will reach us, they want to let the people of Sekhukhune know that, in these times, we stand together, that those who have killed our children and our people, our unarmed people, those who have ruled with terror, will be uprooted like weeds, and so they will perish, a heap of rubbish."

"I hear you," the chief said, "we receive that word with open hearts, our eyes and ears will move with the wind, to heed that, do tell the people that we have buried our dead. We shall not rest until what they died for is achieved, not only that, but until our whole land, every sand of it, every stone of it, belongs to us. Tell the people that the sound of guns, and the sight of flames, will not change our minds about that."

The police, who were still at standby in the village, did not see the timer come, nor did they see him leave. They did though, when the sun was setting hear the song. The song started from the chief's kraal and spread and spread throughout the village:

*"Who heard the mosquito sing,
who heard it tell us to wake,
awake awake the mosquito says,
the mosquito is red and is brown
it sings and sings and sings at night*

*The red and brown paper
which bites like a poisonous mosquito
sings and sings and sings
awake awake the mosquito says"*

So the song said. It spread and spread throughout the village and rang and rang even at night. It was on the 21st of March. On that same day, at noon, word reached the Sekhukhune Police Station, "All police on standby there, to be dispatched immediately to Pretoria". That morning the main centres of South Africa were

white by day. The streets were empty, silent, like those of small little dorps. There were no Black people in sight, there were no machines buzzing. Two black cops, walking the streets of Alexandra, heard the song: they had heard it as they were climbing on trucks in Sekhukhuneland, heading in response to the word from Pretoria, for Pretoria.

*"P.W. P.W. who do you think you
are
who do you think you are,
beware P.W. the brown and red
mosquito
beware it will bite you.*

*The red and brown mosquito
which bites and stings
sings and sings and sings
awake awake the mosquito says."*

The little girls, singing, laughing and playing hopscotch in the yard, stopped a while when they heard the footsteps. They saw the two cops, in the blue uniforms, in rifles and all, walking slowly along London Street. They were heading for the tree, at London and 14th Avenue, for a shade. The little girls gave them a brief look and then resumed with their game and song. P.W. or someone had dispatched the cops, to walk in twos, in all the townships, throughout South Africa.

The two cops stood by the gate, where the girls were playing. "Hey girls," said one cop, "may you please give us water, we are thirsty," he leaned on the fence, the sun was red-hot, his FN was heavy. The song stopped.

"Put your guns down first," one of the little girls said.

"No, we are not allowed to do so," one cop said.

"I am not allowed to give water to our enemies," the girl said, and the song and the game resumed.

The cops walked on, slowly, faced by the empty streets and the hot sun, carrying their FN rifles.