

ESCAPE TO FREEDOM

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The faint sound of a roaring engine sang in my ears. I thought I saw a helicopter overflying us. Then, guu... I knocked against the window frame of the bus. With a start, I woke up and looked from under my eyelashes. Eyes were staring at me, but avoided me when I returned the stare. I remembered I dozed for some time. I could not help it: the heat, the diesel fumes and exhaustion from the previous night's sleeplessness, all took advantage of me.

I tried to look normal as far as possible, but the effort itself seemed to betray me. The roaring engine was now clearer and louder. We had entered another area of our journey, me and the passengers, we were moving along terrifying mountain slopes. The bus changed into second gear, then to first, and then to extra low. It was negotiating a ghastly curve of a sharp climb.

I thought I saw a helicopter roaring past us - no, it was a dream that time I slept, the result of anxiety proceeding from my tormented brain. I always fancied a helicopter might fly low and order the bus to stop.

I turned to look back, a trail of thick dust rushed in full speed behind us. I looked in front, the road seemed too narrow to allow a pass of two vehicles at the same time, and it was ever climbing, and ever bending to the right or left. I looked to the side, through the window, it was a sight that made my eyes bulge, a steep descending at about seventy degrees angles of depression, descending to what seemed to be an abyss. Again, I looked back to the left, the road snaked its way on the mountain slopes, that for a moment it seemed we were moving in a circle, for I could clearly see where we passed, the road coming from the west as if it was taking me back to the land of bondage, then turning north, then east, chasing us in full speed as if saying: hurry, hurry lest the forces of evil catch up with you.

A Ford Falcon materialised from a curve in front of us, and in a split second it whizzed passed us, and left me, in a sense of horror, claspng tightly the frame of the seat; should anything happen, just a little mistake - then ends the dream, then cease all hopes to outrun persecution. But I was not thinking of death, I was thinking of regaining consciousness in hospital and find myself handcuffed and a policeman looking wickedly at me.

Yet we moved, me and the passengers; we - I was one of them by the only fact that I was travelling with them in the same bus; yet, I was a lone traveller on a dangerous road, and that is why the feelings of horror were mine alone. Others were laughing and chatting as if nothing grim might happen.

I hoped and wished that as we were climbing, we should climb out of the mountains, which would be difficult to cross at border gate on foot. My hopes and wishes lapsed into a thin layer of faith, when the bus continued to climb, to climb and for ever climbing, coiling its way like a huge imamba among a cluster of impassable rocks.

The bus engine buzzed and groaned a song of solace to the restless and impatient passengers, perhaps to me alone.

We were moving in a jungle of mountains, the Umlembe range of the Eastern Transvaal, forever posing a threat to the unwary, to the fugitive and the genuine traveller alike, that it must bring to memory the ghastly train mishap that ended the lives of the migrant cheap labourers from neighbouring Mozambique. It was a mishap that our grandmothers do not forget to tell us about it even today. It happened during the period of the great locusts or during the time when night fell on earth at eleven o'clock noon, meaning the eclipse of the sun. It happened long ago, yet I could feel its impact, even now its ghastly spirit suffocating us, or me alone. Alone - the others were behaving like tourists, admiring the grim and gaping dongas down the slopes and at the ugly jungle of shrubs below.

With me it was an apparition. I wondered whether my courage was slipping from my chest through the pores; or through my eyes? I could still feel the effects of solitary confinement during the brief years of my internment, and suffocating blanket of the banning order against which now I was trying to wriggle free out of it as I was travelling through these mountains to a friendly country. I was left with a few months of restrictions when the threat of renewal menacingly hung over my head.

For what seemed a half-century's journey, we sank deep into mountain bottoms, but not exactly bottom because the whole place was an amorphous build-up of dongas and shrubs. We were approaching the border.

"There is the Indian shop," said a young man to me, pointing to a matchbox house appearing from behind some trees. This man sat next to me, obviously unconcerned. An hour ago I had ventured to ask him about that shop, lest the bus pass with me right through the border gate without knowing it - and having no passport. All the others had documents.

It was in the evening when we reached the border. We climbed down, and I strolled as naturally as possible, as if I was returning to where I came from but now on foot; I vanished into a shrub down below the road. I lay on the crest of a mountain top, waiting for the blackness of the night to cover the whole area, so that the jumping of the fence could be done with the minimum risk of discovery. I lay hidden in tall grass and shrubs. A lonely area that was, not a single house could be seen in the distance except for the Indian shop and two huts for the African border guards. I lay poised for action, lest a huge snake want my company.

Even then as I lay, torrents of nostalgia came gushing into my heart, and left me a pitiable heap blinking at the sun that strolled in the sky taking its good time to set, indicating that it might decide not to disappear behind the mountains if it wanted to -

thus summing up the extent of my impatience. Yes, nostalgia found it a good opportunity for itself. I knew what it meant to be taken away from my family and friends when I was in prison. Now I thanked God I am not married and still young, thus better fortified to face the odds of exiled life.

My mind flew to horizons unexplored by me, and came back to rest on the plight of the African in our land. He leads a life of escape - he must escape. The entire country of his fathers is a ghetto, and he must escape, though within its borders.

But miserable African at home, you must escape, escape the spooky shadows in the night, lest they be police. Escape from the Tokoloshe, yes the pass-book; the tokoloshe has always been a haunt to you, and yet you must walk with him, never leave him behind, put him in your pocket however frightening he is - if the reader has heard about the legend of the tokoloshe. Swerve free from the executor's axe of the influx control, and all its permits and specials fuss. Escape from the clutches of poverty and cold. Evade the fist of social degradation, lest the blow kaffir you down on the floor on all fours, and a savage 'boy or John' kick sends you flying. Run, blackman, fast, and make sure white racial chauvinism does not catch up with you. You know your own chauvinism is a product of years of rejection by humanity, rejected by the same person who claims to civilize and christianize you. Do you think that the answer is to stoop down on their feet and beg for recognition, when you well know that you are rejected in no uncertain terms that you are a sub-human being? You remember well what you said: 'Baas, baas aseblief ...' and he said: 'Kaffir, get out of my way.' You went to another one, he said it too, rather severely. You once told your son: 'the baas are very good people.' The next day your son comes home kicked in the stomach by the baas. You have been proved a liar. Then you decide you are no longer going to beg for recognition, you automatically become a racialist, and this is a sickness that takes time to heal even when you are free from colonial rule.

Your alternative is to run, but where? When you are in a white ruled state? You have to do his washing, clean his kitchen, and bring up the baby-baas who already knows you are a baboon. Where can you run to when your forehead is tattooed in big block letters: 'Kaffir', for every baas to see anywhere in the country.

Then a few scrape a living, just a handful few. They manage to build a laager for themselves in the form of bank notes and motor-cars' status symbol; that at least even though he is a baboon, he nevertheless owns the latest Ford Galaxie; that he possesses at least a university degree, but that unfortunately does not remove the tattoo on the forehead.

I watched the sun disappearing behind a mountain. As it did it cast a red glow of light, forming an arc. For poets, that was a moment of inspiration, vision and imagination. For me it was either a vision of hope or doom. Then there was twilight, a moment for me to go deep into meditation, since I still had to wait for darkness to settle. I recollected my last hours at home.

On the evening of my departure my heart was filled with excitement. Throughout the day at work my body was light, my footsteps were soft, and my mind was heavy with thoughts - planning and re-planning. I almost did my work automatically: the packing of sweets and biscuits, the kinds of tea and kinds of coffee; all these got into my nerves. The stench of koffiehuis and boecreplaas coffee always made me feel dizzy; the bakery smell of biscuits was filling my belly tight each time I worked on them. I knew my work well, and I was swift. My eyes told no story and no one guessed what mischief was being formulated inside this skull of mine. At lunch-time I deserted.

That evening at home I was feeling good. I decided to say good-bye to my sweet-hearts. I wanted to enjoy with them for the last time. I went to my dark, stoutish, short little thing. I told her I was going to school, and said: "give lady". She said she was sick. Oh, God, I nearly fell dead. I went to another one who liked me because I might steal certain articles for her at the big store. She said too: "female sickness". I was finished. I could not force it, because I was not a sexual pervert. I went to my 'baby' whom I seduced some months ago. Why not when I had already quarreled with her 'mummy'. While she (my baby) delayed at her home, I wandered about, and by the time I got round, she had come out (I learned from her friend) and she was looking for me. I could not find her, and time was running out, so I went home feeling bitter at heart. When time had come tension had built up in my blood, nerves, muscles and bones. I missed the ten o'clock train - because of girls; that was night; so I caught the 1.00 a.m. train the same night.

As I lay there watching the slowly disappearing twilight, I brought to mind many such occasions of good living - girls. I may remember my homeland when thinking of them. Here, nostalgia has surely found a fertile spot. When misery and oppression was intense, love alleviated it. Some say booze does it, but I did not drink, so it was girls. Here, white domination could not extend its paw. Running away from white domination also meant forsaking those who love me.

And yet I ran. I left the shackles of white oppression.

Instead of running within the ghetto, I found myself running out of it, running for my life. For my life because I nearly lost it down in the abyss of a donga, with no one to ever find my carcass. I lost my way on the mountain top. It was so dark I could hardly see my finger. On all fours I groped the darkness and the tall grass, pausing at times, lest I intrude into the solemn abode of a gentle snake.

Umlembe range is a jumble of cruel mountains. The position of the gate has been well chosen, because the area is death to cross during the night except near the gate or where ends the fence; beyond that is a pass to one's doom. The gate is in a gorge. For hours I searched for the bus road, until I found it. I had no guide, no contact. I did not want one. I trusted my courage to see me through. I was a lone figure in the middle of the night, that like a fiend in a haunted neighbourhood, I lurked and lunged forward, that today I wonder what force propelled me to freedom.