

THE CHALLENGE

THE CHALLENGE

ANDRES LASZLO JR.

Inspired by “My Uncle Jacinto” by Andres Laszlo Sr.

Copyright © Andres Laszlo Jr.
All rights reserved.

PROLOGUE

‘Drugs!’ the detective exclaimed, ‘this is enough to put you away.’
Sipho’s father feigned an unworried look, ‘Cool it man; it’s just a few grams of weed.’

‘Few? There are at least ten.’

‘It’s exactly four point nine, it’s just for my personal use and you’ve got no proof I’m dealing.’

‘Shall we take him in?’ asked the police officer who was kneeling next to Sipho. ‘I mean he’s obviously guilty as hell.’

‘There’s not enough to charge him, and he knows it.’

‘Shouldn’t we check the weight?’

‘No use, his scales are probably better than ours, so unless we can find the rest...’

‘But we can prove he was here, the wholesaler.’

‘Yes, but we can’t prove that he bought from him, and this doesn’t look like wholesale packaging; all we can do is to confiscate it.’

‘It’s been repacked; that’s how he sells it; he’s made these packages himself.’

‘We know that and he knows that, but how do we prove it?’

The police officer looked at the boy, ‘Can’t we question him?’

‘He’s just a baby, I’m not sure we’re allowed to.’

‘You stop that!’ Sipho’s father exclaimed, ‘you have no right to question him! He’s only five and too young to give evidence!’

The detective, from behind, carefully lowered his baton to rest on the protesting man’s shoulder.

Sipho’s father was immediately silenced.

The police officer looked at Sipho with a big smile, ‘You look like a good boy; you don’t mind if I ask a few questions, do you?’

Sipho – five, lean, long black hair and big brown eyes – said nothing but glared at the police officer angrily and suspiciously.

‘Your father met with a man here yesterday, a big white man with a ponytail, didn’t he?’

‘No, he really didn’t. There was nobody here – there really wasn’t.’

‘We know that because three of your neighbors saw him.’

‘They did?’

‘Yes, both times as he came and left.’

Sipho looked down and bit his lip.

‘And we’ve found this paper wrap. Inside it, there’s some really bad stuff.’

Sipho looked away; away from the paper wrap, his father, and the police officers.

‘What’s inside probably came from a plastic bag; did you see where your father hid that bag?’

Sipho didn’t answer.

‘Did you see if the man who sold your father that plastic bag sold him anything else?’

‘I... I didn’t see anything.’

‘But you must have seen the man who sold your father a bag full of drugs; the man who promised to bring you a bicycle next time.’

‘A bicycle?’

‘Yes.’

‘A two-wheeler?’

‘Definitely.’

‘With gears?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘I...’ Sipho stopped dead and looked suspiciously at the police officer. ‘I didn’t see anything.’

‘But you live here...’

‘...Yes...’

‘So how come you didn’t see anything?’

‘Because they...’

‘Because they what?’

‘Because they... they threw me out.’

‘*They?*’

Sipho pointed at his father, ‘He! He threw me out. He does it all the time!’

The police officer looked angrily at the boy.

‘He did,’ Sipho assured the police officer, ‘he did,’

As the police officers could find no more drugs, they eventually left the boy and the dealer.

Sipho’s father looked lovingly at his son, ‘You’re such a good little boy,’ he said while pretending not to notice Sipho’s inquiries about the bicycles and gears, ‘and I will always look after you.’

As the police car could be heard driving off, Sipho’s father peeped through the window to make sure both police officers really were in the car – they were. Then, after quelling a violent coughing attack and carefully checking that no other representatives of the law were staying behind, he surreptitiously opened the front door and approached the remains of an old “Volkswagen Beetle”

Prologue

that was parked in the front yard. Siphó's father opened the hood and – after having to contort his body – managed to recover a plastic bag from deep inside the back of the wreck. Back inside – having locked the door behind him – he opened a wrapper from inside the bag and with shaking hands, he mixed some of its content with tobacco.

Siphó watched the paper that his father had coughed in; there was blood on it – lots of it.

The hands of Siphó's father shook violently as he started to roll a cigarette.

His father had told Siphó that the blood was from having swallowed a diamond at his work in the mines that sometimes cut him in the stomach.

Siphó couldn't understand why anyone would swallow a diamond. *Why, when we could have sold it instead and gotten lots of money?*

His father's hands shook even more as he tried to finish rolling the cigarette.

At first, his father's coughing had become worse by the month, then by the week; but today Siphó felt it worsened more than ever before compared to yesterday.

'This time... this time I might be gone...' Siphó's father said, watching the smoke tunneling out through his mouth and up through his nostrils – looking really silly – 'this time I might be gone for a long time... a very long time.'

'You m... m... m... mustn't go, I...'

'Hey! You stop that!'

'What?'

'That!'

His father told him that the coughing was nothing to worry about – that it came from the dust in the mines and the diamond he had swallowed – and that he soon would be all right again. Though Siphó desperately wanted to believe his father, he didn't. His father often lied to him and the constant complaints seemed to contradict his father's optimism. Also, Siphó remembered his mother; he had liked his mother very much and he still sometimes nearly believed his father when he assured him that she would one day return. She too had coughed, more and more, until one day she had just disappeared. 'What "that"?''

'That silly stuttering.'

'I'm not stuttering!'

'I'm not going to leave you, so you can stop that!'

Siphó had missed his mother very much right from the beginning but it was only when he realized that she probably would never come back that he had first started to stutter. It wasn't a bad stutter and he only did it when he feared that maybe his father too didn't like him and was about to leave; Siphó only stuttered when he felt that he was about to be left without anybody. 'I didn't; I didn't.'

'It's all right,' his father assured, smiling and again ruffling the boy's hair, 'You'll be fine.'

Siphó hated having his hair ruffled.

Sipho's father inhaled deeply.

His father smoked one of those funny-smelling cigarettes, partly made from what the police officers had been looking for. His father said it helped against the coughing but Sipho figured it only made him silly.

'Your half-uncle Baba,' Sipho's father said – sounding as if about to say something he didn't really mean – 'he's not such a bad dude as I might sometimes have led you to believe; he's actually...' Sipho's father swallowed hard, 'he's actually quite cool.'

Sipho adored his half-uncle Baba or 'the Black Guy' as his father used to call him. His half-uncle lived in a very luxurious mansion, his freezer was always full of Magnum ice cream bars and Baba was also a very world famous boxer. Sipho boxed with his half-uncle every time they met, and he always won, and because his half-uncle didn't want the people from the newspapers to learn that Sipho could knock him out whenever he wanted to, Sipho and his half-uncle – after some serious discussions – had arrived at an agreement. They had agreed that as long as Sipho didn't tell anyone how easily he could knock out his half-uncle – who was ranked the sixth-best boxer in the world – his half-uncle would keep his freezer full of Magnum ice cream bars, exclusively for Sipho's benefit.

'Yes, he's actually quite all right.'

Sipho gave a quizzical look; it was very unlike his father to talk of his half-uncle in complimentary terms. As a matter of fact his father normally only remembered Sipho's half-uncle when in some sort of trouble, especially money trouble or trouble with the police who seemed to have a special and very unfair dislike for his father.

'I'm gonna go back to the mines soon; how would you like to stay with the Black Guy... Sorry, let me rephrase that; how would you like to stay with your heroic half-uncle Baba? I actually could be gone for longer than before; a little longer.'

Sipho wasn't even close to stuttering but he nearly said 'Wow!' – he didn't really like to stay with his granny who didn't have a fridge and who didn't even know what a Magnum was - yet he sensed that 'Wow!' would be a bad thing to say, so instead he just nodded his head and attempted to look really sad and serious, 'Maybe that would be best.'

'We might have to talk him into it, but that should be easy as pie; he doesn't have the backbone to refuse you anything.'

Sipho wanted to defend his half-uncle – to say that his half-uncle had lots of backbone – but again he sensed that wouldn't have been a good idea.

Sipho's father stood up, hid the bag from the car, told the boy to come along, closed the door behind them, and started to walk towards where the minibusses stopped. 'He's got no backbone, that's his real problem.'

'Are we going to visit half-uncle Baba?'

'Yes, he's fighting some young kid tonight, so you must ask for tickets.'

Prologue



'Would you like to stay with the black guy?'

‘Do you think Mister Kipling will let you in?’

His father pondered the question for a while, but as they arrived at where the minibusses stopped he had found the solution, ‘We climb the wall, then I’ll pick the lock to the Rolls and we wait inside.’

‘Will you tell me how he got it?’

‘Got what?’

‘The tooth.’

‘The fang?’

‘The tooth that hangs around his neck.’

‘That silly thing that makes him think he’s better and more honorable than everybody else?’

‘Yes.’

‘And why do you think I’d tell you now of all times?’

‘Because you seem nice today.’

‘So... so you really wanna know?’

‘Yes!’

‘Just ‘yes’?’

‘Yes! I want to know very much! Yes please!’

‘He took it from a leopard; he fought it and won, that’s how he got it.’

‘He fought a leopard?’

‘Yes.’

‘Wow!’ Siphon imagined his half-uncle boxing with a leopard, knock it out with a perfect uppercut and extract a tooth. Then Siphon said it three more times, rather loud and in quick succession, ‘Wow! Wow! Wow!’

‘He probably had some pal hidden in a tree with a rifle as a back-up.’

Then – as Siphon realized that his father didn’t like to see him so impressed by his half-uncle – he added, ‘When I grow up, then I’m gonna box with a tiger.’

Siphon’s father – his pupils the size of peanuts and tears rolling down his cheeks – smiled happily, as he exhaled the smoke, ‘To hell with what they all say; you are my boy after all.’

Siphon could see that his words had pleased his father very much so he decided to say them once more, ‘When I grow up I’m gonna box with a tiger... and I’m gonna win.’

That’s how Siphon, on the day his half-uncle was about to box the teenager – a fight that would turn his uncle from superman to a hobo with no claim to honor other than his promise never to box again - made his dying father very happy and that’s also how Siphon got his name changed to Tiger.

CHAPTER 1

Tiger's uncle never returned to like he used to be after the fight with Jonathan and Tiger's father never came back from the mines. Tiger sometimes suspected that his father had finally coughed up that big diamond and taken an airplane to America, but to be quite honest he did not really think all that much about his father any longer. However, he did think a lot about his uncle and why he had changed so much after the fight. His uncle had promised never to box again, a decision that Tiger figured was very strange because his uncle had knocked out his opponent so fantastically well that he had remained on the floor even after they had left, and his uncle had been so good that three police officers had to guide him through the exuberant crowd.

Tiger liked to live with his uncle, even if the houses they lived in before had been much nicer than the one they lived in today. He liked it even though there was no longer any freezer full of Magnum ice cream bars around and no Kipling to play with. The best thing was that as his uncle didn't want to box any more, his uncle had to make money in other ways, and these ways more or less always included Tiger. This, Tiger liked very much; and that's why he got very frightened when people told him that the take-me-away-people would take his uncle from him because they earned too little money. Even if his uncle was still the fastest man in the world, Tiger didn't think his uncle was ready to make it without him quite yet. That's why Tiger hadn't started school yet, and that's why Tiger sometimes figured that maybe his uncle should start boxing again, even if that would mean them having less time to work together.

*

Baba came to look upon himself as a murderer and that's exactly what he told the court, 'I am guilty; it was nothing short of murder and the only just sentence would be to shoot me.'

The court declared him innocent of all charges and as he was about to be set free the judge had called him into his private chambers. There Baba had been served a large whiskey and the judge had told him to go get himself a world championship belt to prove that the decision to acquit him had been the correct one.

As the court wouldn't punish him, Baba had felt he had to do so himself and as a self-proclaimed judge, he had shown little mercy: Baba had sentenced himself never to box again. By that same verdict, Baba also - though he hadn't reflected over it at the time - had sentenced not only himself but also the child to whom he had become the unofficial guardian to a life of poverty.

Baba had taken to the bottle - mainly the beer bottle - and with no boxing, the money soon stopped flowing in. He had been forced to leave his rented mansion and soon his friends - every single one of them - had felt that having Baba as their friend was no longer something worth striving for. Baba understood why they had all left but those thoughts were not what bothered Baba most, and they soon got drowned in alcohol; the boy had understood too, but it hadn't really bothered him. Baba's butler, who was the last to go, again and again, had attempted to get him off the bottle and back into boxing, but his old servant had failed. Baba, unable to pay the man's last wage, instead had given Kipling his prize possession: the red cape he had worn the night he knocked out Topaz, who had then been ranked sixth in the world.

As Baba grew poorer and poorer, he kept tumbling down the social ladder of Cape Town exactly in the way like when he had used to box: at a speed previously unheard of. Often he was pursued and pushed down the ladder by the tax-people who wouldn't believe that Alexander Baby Baba - the man who until quite recently had been regarded as South Africa's great boxing hope - was incapable of supporting himself. However, Baba really was destitute and he kept tumbling down that ladder until he moved into the little shack in which he and his nephew lives today. It is a brown little shack situated on the dunes of the Hout Bay part of Mandela Park. Mandela Park is a large squatter camp half an hour's drive east of the center of Cape Town.

Though life, in general, hadn't turned out very well for Baba, yet there was one thing - apart from not boxing - he prides himself in. Baba believed that he had kept his promise to his half-brother: his promise to look after his nephew. However, not all would agree as to the quality of Baba's guardianship and if surveyed, the consensus among their neighbors would be that Baba was far from an ideal guardian. As drinking made Baba ever poorer and stupider, his nephew had to gather his wits swiftly and so he did. While Baba tumbled downhill Tiger swiftly grew shrewder and street wiser and today - at least so some would say - it's the boy who looks after his uncle rather than it being the other way around.

Nowadays the threat from the tax-people that once used to chase after Baba is gone, but only to be replaced by a new threat: separation, or "Mister Mandela" as Baba thinks of separation. Today the social welfare people, Wicked Vish, and several others are doing their best to separate Baba from his nephew. Some of them have good intentions but some are quite bad people, and both sorts are getting ever closer to success.

Most people managing a betting shop in Cape Town today would still remember the name 'Baby Baba', and few, if any, would recognize him as the great South African hope of only a few years ago. Yet, even if one did recognize him, it is of course totally inconceivable that such a shop

Chapter 2



It's a brown little shack on the dunes

manager would know anything about his relationship to his nephew. However, if one – just as a thought experiment - assumed that there had been such a shop and in addition to this, a betting shop manager with all the pertinent information plus customers willing to bet, then “Baba to keep custody of nephew until the end of the month 20-1” would probably have seemed rather fair odds. So the punter betting on separation to win, probably wouldn’t even have gotten his money back, at least not after commissions. Anyhow, this was the day of the football world championship semi-finals, so the punters would have had other things to do.

*

Tiger, just awakening, rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and reached out, mechanically, towards the shelf where an old alarm clock stood in silence, with its one remaining hand pointing at an hour that had long gone by. Tiger turned the hand to nine o’clock as he did every morning and during the next twenty-four hours of gravity, though Tiger preferred to think of it as ‘time’, would pull the rusty old hand back down into the area between half-past seven and eight.

Outside the sun was up, yet it was strangely chilly and there were raindrops on the window.

At the back of the shack, his uncle snored in a deep baritone. All Tiger could see was some curly black hair that stuck out from beneath the blanket and one of his uncle’s white spots.

Beside his uncle stood a little makeshift table that’s being held upright with an old umbrella with a sharpened tip. On top of the table laid an old wicked-looking knife - in case of intruders. Next to the knife stood a jar of exclusive Italian shoe-polish that – to somebody capable of recognizing its supreme exclusivity - contrasted starkly with the surrounding slum. At the head of his uncle’s bed, there were beer-bottles; some were full, but most were empty. The full bottles were all leaning against the wall; it was cooler there as the shack stood against a dune.

By the stove stood a milk-bottle and other things for making coffee; Tiger sniffed at the bottle and he pulled an ugly face. He didn’t grimace so much because the milk was past its prime, which it was, but because he held a very intense dislike for all milk, especially when served warm. Though Tiger disliked milk and never would drink it – not even in his coffee - his uncle was quite the opposite and wouldn’t have his breakfast coffee without it; not even powder milk would do. Thus, Tiger, as he finished dressing, had gone through the most commonly used opening gambits for the battle that he knew lay ahead of him: he prepared to go to the ‘spaza’, the local grocery shop. There, in one way or the other, he intended to hustle his uncle some milk. *He doesn’t smile much any longer, but when there’s fresh milk for his morning coffee then sometimes he still does.*

Tiger searched his uncle’s clothes for money - as anticipated, unsuccessfully - before grabbing an old basket and opening the door; though the sun shone on Table Mountain, it was beginning to rain. Tiger, who loved water in all its forms, swiftly ran out into the rain where he – just like a child - started to prance about. His first thought was that he really ought to go to the spaza to try



His uncle's heavy snores suddenly stopped – Tiger froze

to get the milk. His second thought was that maybe he ought to wash; his uncle would approve of that. *If I do that, and if the rain hitting the roof awakes him, he probably won't be too upset about there not being any milk.* Then, as the rain suddenly grew much heavier, inspiration struck and Tiger got an even better idea. He swiftly scurried up to the little ditch that ran just above the shack.

From up there on the high ground, Tiger could see many of the newly constructed houses. He could also see the house of his best friend, Themba, who lived with his family next door but on the other side of the high ditch. Themba - who was the younger of the two - loved rain even more than Tiger, but as Tiger called out for him there was no answer. *Maybe he's in bed; he's been coughing a lot in the last weeks.*

As Tiger rushed back towards the door he – though only in the very last moment – remembered his sleeping uncle. He hit the brakes, skidded to a halt, and only just kept his balance. Tiger opened the door carefully and tiptoed back into the shack where he started to collect the required material. Tiger was the best waterwheel-builder in all of the Hout Bay part of Mandela Park, if not in the whole of Mandela Park, though Themba came to a close second.

Tiger silently picked up two pieces of plank, two long ladles and, from beside his uncle's bed, the wicked-looking old knife. As his hands were both full he put the knife between his teeth. Then, as he tiptoed towards the door his uncle's heavy snores suddenly stopped - Tiger froze.

There he stood – two long spoons in his right hand, two pieces of a plank in his left, and in his mouth, the knife – hardly able to breathe. After a nerve-wracking wait - his uncle didn't like Tiger to build waterwheels, nor to be awoken in the mornings - the snores recommenced. Tiger quickly returned out into the rain that now came down even heavier than before.

Tiger looked up towards the ditch and his eyes sparkled as they fell on a tiny thread of water that gurgled down through an old leak in the ditch. He climbed back up; there was still no sign of Themba or of any activity around his friend's house. Up there Tiger started - though frequently and severely warned not to - to dig out a canal to divert the flow. *There was already a big leak in the wall, there really was, and all I really did was to make it a tiny bit bigger.* He then - after digging out a diverting canal - gathered some stones that he used to block the water's original path. It was an instant success and the diversion swiftly swelled, gathering strength and momentum. Then, in virtually no time at all, Tiger's nimble fingers turned the gathered material into a waterwheel that soon turned gaily in the middle of the gurgling stream.

As the rain grew even heavier – heavier than any rain Tiger had ever seen before – the stream swelled ever more and the wheel turned faster and faster. Tiger watched as if spellbound by his creation in fascination.

*



Tiger watched his construction in fascination

Among the row of houses was the grocery shop of 'Grump' - the grumpy shopkeeper. Tiger liked the shopkeeper, and the shopkeeper liked Tiger, yet there was one big problem; the shopkeeper didn't like his uncle - not one bit.

As Tiger approached the spaza he peeped into the shop to make sure the take-me-away-people weren't lurking around; they weren't, and Tiger entered.

Grump stood on top of a chair, attempting to fix a leak in the roof. The rain was too heavy but the shopkeeper – while unsuccessfully wrestled with the roof - indulged in some wonderfully colorful cursing. Tiger was certain that the shopkeeper was the best curser in the whole of Mandela Park. Eventually, Grump was forced to give up and as he climbed down he eyed the boy up suspiciously, 'Well, what do you want?'

'Hello, Grump.'

'And don't you Grump me!'

Tiger held up the basket towards the shopkeeper and smiled pleasantly, 'Have you seen Themba, Mister Grump?'

'What do you think this is: tourist information? Do you want the results of tonight's match too?'

'I am sorry Mister Grump, then I just want a small milk-bottle, please, Mister Grump.'

He could have watched the spectacle for hours - as he had many times before - but then suddenly, as if somebody had turned a switch, the skies opened. The water poured down in a way Tiger wouldn't have believed possible. Tiger picked up the old basket and a piece of broken roofing material that he used to shield himself, and he ran off towards a nearby row of houses and the challenge that lay ahead of him. *Maybe I'll meet Themba in the spaza.*

Grump took a bottle out of the fridge and placed it in the basket, 'Two Rand eighty.'

Tiger didn't like what he saw. *Either he hasn't got his beers today or he's been fighting with his lady: this is not going to be easy.* 'I forgot the money, can I pay tomorrow?'

'Who's the milk for?'

'For me; it really is.'

'Then it's free; drink up.'

'I... I'd rather drink it at home.'

'What's the difference?'

'I'm not very thirsty right now; I'm really not.'

'Of course, you're *really* not; you hate milk - you've told me so yourself a dozen times.'

'That's only hot milk, and I'm sure I will get thirsty later, I really want...'

'What you really want is to take that drunken no-good milk for his morning coffee! Don't you deny it! Now I, I normally...'

'He likes it so much,' Tiger interrupted in an attempt to side-track the shopkeeper, 'and he gets so happy when there's milk in the morning.'

Chapter 2

‘Now I, I normally start the day off with a few beers myself,’ the shopkeeper continued, determined not to be led astray, ‘I’ve never denied that – and you know that.’

Tiger nodded and attempted to look serious; he’d been through this many times before and he knew what was expected from him. The only important question was whether this would end with or without milk, ‘No Mister Grump, no you haven’t.’

‘But never - never except Tuesdays and Thursdays - do I have more than six Bottles: that’s the trick. Do you understand?’

Tiger nodded, smilingly, as if he understood, sympathized and agreed.

‘But that no-good, your uncle, he can’t even keep sober enough to bring up a good boy like you properly; it’s a wonder that you don’t steal, smoke and sniff glue already!’

‘My uncle would never allow me to do that and he’s not a no-good; he is a boxer and he is very honorable.’

‘*Was* a boxer... a long time ago, and he was never like those guys,’ Grump said, nodding at a poster on the wall, showing the Spanish and German football teams that would compete in the semi-finals of the world championship that same evening. ‘He wasn’t even a proper athlete. Just naturally gifted, everything for nothing he had, and that pretty much sums up your uncle.’

‘He still has it.’

‘And now look at him; picking cigarette butts off the streets.’

‘It’s brown gold.’

‘Call it what you want; they’re still butts.’

‘And he does it fantastically fast.’

‘And you, poor sod, he makes you do it too: do you call that honorable?’

‘My uncle is very honorable because... he fought with a leopard, he never lets me do anything bad, he has never been knocked down, he always keeps his dignity, he never lies and al-... al-...’

‘-beit,’ Grump assisted, he too had been through this before and knew what was expected, ‘albeit.’

‘Thank you; and albeit things are not exactly as he would have liked them to be...’

‘Rubbish! You don’t even understand what you’re saying; he’s nothing but a no-good bum and that you should have understood by now.’

‘Is not! He’s very honorable.’

‘All right, so maybe he still retains some of his honor and maybe he still deserves to wear that silly tooth.’

Tiger, surprised at this new gambit, nodded his agreement.

‘Maybe he doesn’t lie and cheat as much as some of us do and maybe he even has some dignity left. I’m not saying he has, but just for the sake of argument I won’t deny it.’

Tiger, surprised, looked pleased, ‘Nobody except Mister Mandela has more honor than him.’

‘But if that’s so, and I say *if*, then that’s all he’s got and now I’d like you to tell me something.

Tiger nodded

‘I want you to tell me what use is that honor of his.’

‘Use?’

‘What will it buy him?’

‘Buy?’

‘Will it buy him the fare to town?’

‘His honor?’

‘Yes.’

‘...No.’

‘Electricity?’

‘No.’

‘Bread?’

‘No.’

‘Beer?’

‘No.’

‘Precisely, it won’t! It won’t even buy him a bloody milk-bottle; not even a small one! If that dignity and honor of his won’t even get him that, then he can keep it as far as I am concerned.’

Tiger didn’t answer. *He’s definitely been fighting with Mrs. Grump.*

‘And there’s something else; something you might not be totally aware of.’

Tiger looked attentively at the shopkeeper.

*

M.E. the old postman could look back on a long and distinguished career, a career that had many highs and only very few significant lows. M.E. had delivered mail to the best parts of Cape Town as well as the worst. During his long career, he had acquired a reputation of being a man devoted to his job and accurate in his deliveries. However, one day in the early days of his career a letter had dropped out of one of his mailbags outside the sorting office. M.E. had been on his way to, among other things, deliver the mail to the fishing-boat that carried mail to Robben Island. After delivering the bag and finishing his round – as M.E. returned to the sorting office – his colleagues had informed him about the letter. Forgetting a letter was, of course, a bad thing, whoever it was meant for, but it was under normal circumstances far from a catastrophe. However, as M.E. had looked at the envelope his mouth had dried up and his pulse had risen. The addressee had been none other than “Prisoner 46664, Robben Island, Cape Town, South Africa” and the sender had been an Olof Palme, who had been the president of a country called Sweden and who had recently been murdered. M.E. had a brother in law who was a fisherman and – as M.E. was not one to accept failure without putting up a fight – together they had set out for the island in the late



'Do you know why he keeps on with this silly honor-stuff?'

afternoon. After several incidents due to the inclement weather, they had finally reached the island only to be apprehended by the coastguard, escorted back to the mainland, arrested and charged for attempting to free prisoner 46664. The judge had laughed at the charges and then he had complimented the postman on his devotion. Finally, the judge had given M.E. the nickname that the postman had already ordered to be engraved on his tombstone.

Mandela Express looked angrily at the bloody letter that threatened to destroy his second-biggest day; the day he was invited to watch the first world football championship semi-finals ever to be played out on South African soil. It had six crossed off addresses – all from completely different parts of town – the sender was a wicked promoter called “Seven B” and the addressee was an old boxing legend in obvious free fall whose present whereabouts nobody seemed to know anything about.

*

Grump gave the boy his I’ve-got-something-important-to-say-look, ‘When things get tougher, as you very well know they soon will, then how long do you think he will be able to hang on to that honor?’

‘My uncle will always be honorable.’

‘Even when nobody will give him any more credit?’

Tiger nodded.

‘Even when they take you away?’

‘My uncle will always be honorable and we will never be sep... sep...’

‘Separated.’

‘Thank you.’

‘You don’t understand; your uncle’s honor is almost gone.’

‘Is not.’

‘When he first came here, that tooth of his dangling around his neck was for everyone to see – do you remember?’

Tiger nodded, reluctantly as he knew what would follow.

‘That was because then he still felt he deserved to wear it – God knows why - but now he keeps it hidden well inside his shirt; don’t you tell me you haven’t noticed.’

‘That’s just because he doesn’t want it to get lost.’

‘And as to you two ‘always being together’, you can just forget about it; a few days from now there’ll be no more “you two”.’

Tiger said nothing.

‘The welfare-people were here inquiring about you three times last week and the day before yesterday they found your shack.’

Chapter 2

‘They did?’

‘Yes, just after you’d left for town; they went down to knock at your door, and then they came up here to ask questions.’

‘What questions?’

‘Whether he had registered you for school and whether he had gotten himself a proper job.’

‘They always ask that.’

‘And then the lady said they had a flag with your name.’

‘A flag with my name?’

‘Yes.’

‘Was it a nice flag?’

‘I don’t know; I didn’t really understand what she meant, but I’m sure it was nothing good.’

‘Soon he will start to box again. Then we will become very rich and we will move back to town or some other nice place where there are no take-me-away-people.’

‘Dream on; he doesn’t want to leave this place and he probably never will.’

‘He will, we will move as soon as he starts to box.’

‘Your uncle will never box again; he says so himself.’

‘He will; he just hasn’t understood that yet, and we will leave very soon.’

‘Deep down that drunkard knows that he won’t leave this place until he’s either thrown out or carried out feet first.’

‘No!’

‘He might deny it, but he’d do anything to stay; he loves lazing about out here and he’d rather lose you than do some honest work.’

Tiger said nothing; he felt confused and he didn’t really want to understand what the shopkeeper was telling him.

‘Do you know why he feeds you with all this silly honor-stuff?’

‘No,’ said Tiger, and a second too late he realized that he had probably sounded more curious than he ought to have, ‘no I don’t think so.’

‘For a grown-up, when money gets short, honor and self-respect become very hard to hold on to and the day an honor-freak like your uncle can no longer convince himself that he is honorable, everything collapses.’

‘Must one have money to have honor?’

‘Yes.’

‘So honor is something one can buy?’

‘I don’t know, maybe not yet, but money sure can be used to buy most things – maybe all things - that make others consider you honorable.’

Tiger said nothing, but he figured he understood.

‘He knows that,’ Grump continued, ‘every honor-freak knows that, and that’s why he teaches you all those fancy words: ‘dignity’, ‘albeit’, ‘separation’ – bollocks!’

‘My uncle would never teach me “bollocks” – I’ve learned that from the cigarette man – and it’s not his fault.’

‘Rubbish! Once the bottle-man gets you there’s no way back; you might as well go lion hunting.’

‘But it’s not his fault. He gets ill at night if he doesn’t drink - it’s because of rheumatism.’

‘Right.’

‘It’s true, it really is, and the doctors say so.’

‘The white?’

‘No, the real.’

‘Sure, and did I mention that Mister Mandela is my uncle!’

Tiger looked down.

‘No money; no milk.’

‘I’ll come back with the money.’

‘Whenever you like,’ shouted Grump after the boy who – as he ran out of the spaza – nearly collided with the postman. ‘But as long as it’s for that no-good Baba - you pay.’

Mandela Express turned to the shopkeeper, ‘Baba? Alexander Baba?’

*

Though the rain had stopped – it even seemed as if the sun was about to break through the dark clouds – Tiger couldn’t help but feel bad. He felt bad about failing to get the milk and he felt bad about Grump’s comments about his uncle. *He should have given me the milk after all the bad things he said.*

On the one hand, Tiger was very fond of his uncle. Though his uncle seemed to get unhappier by the day, his uncle was always very good to him, and what’s more, his uncle was so fast! Tiger was certain that his uncle was the fastest man in the entire world, and that all of the other kids if they had been forced to tell the truth, would have had to, albeit most rather reluctantly, agree.

But then, on the other hand, it seemed strange to Tiger that good people would say all these bad things about his uncle for no reason. *If he really loves me, Tiger sometimes thought, why doesn’t he start to box again so that we can stay together? Then the take-me-away-people would go away and we could move to somewhere nice again.*

Then – just as Tiger was about to walk off towards another spaza - he could hear the solution to all his problems come strolling towards him.

*



'Money now, no pushing, no rings, and no knuckles.'

From between two tumbledown shacks came the voices of boys; it was three of the 'Basketballers': Themba's big brother and two of his friends. They talked about how impressed the girls had been at the football match the previous evening. One of the girls – the prettiest – apparently had said that they were the ones who really should have played in the semi-finals that same night, rather than Spain and Holland.

Tiger knew exactly what would follow. *Here comes Baba's milk.*

'Hey! Pussycat!' Themba's brother called out, 'Will you dance, eh?'

'Where is Themba?' Tiger asked, pretending neither to be too interested nor to notice the disrespectful way in which his tigerness had been addressed, 'I haven't seen him for a long time.'

'What business is that of yours, eh?'

'He's my best friend.'

'...He's gone...' Themba's brother didn't seem happy about Tiger's question, 'He's gone to stay with an aunt in Mpumalanga; so will you dance, eh?'

'How much do you pay?'

'Same as always; one Rand each and we are three - so that's three Rand.'

That's enough for the milk and two chewing gums. 'All right; money now, no pushing, no rings, and no knuckles.'

Each boy paid the agreed fee in advance and one removed a real nice ring with a dead man's skull over two crossed bones on it.

'Dancing' or 'duck and dance' as was the official name, meant that somebody - in this case Tiger - was used for live target practice. The challengers, in this case, the Basketballers, in boxing-style tried to slap him on either cheek or chin while he, the dancer, tried to dodge their attempts by quick moves: by ducking and dancing.

Tiger was by far the best dancer around and though he was much younger than most of his challengers, he was so fast and agile that he rarely was slapped. The Basketballers weren't particularly good; they were all footballers and had acquired their nickname only because they were tall and not because they played basketball. Being tall is not at all an advantage when it comes to balance and speed. *Like stealing chewing gum from babies.*

The two first rounds passed without any mishaps whatsoever, and in the last round - against Themba's big brother who was the slowest of the three - things started well enough too. However, after ducking his opponent's attacks with ease for nearly the full round Tiger decided to try something he normally wouldn't. Tiger maneuvered himself in beneath his opponent's guard. There in the eye of the storm, he swiveled around his opponent until the tall boy got so queasy that he nearly toppled over.

As Tiger made Themba's big brother look a fool the other boys laughed at their friend – delighted as they were that someone was made to look even more foolish than themselves – and they cheered the ex-boxer's nephew. "Ronaldo! Ronaldo!"

Chapter 2

Tiger could have left it at that and all would probably have been well, but that's not what happened. Tiger, in an ill-considered act of mockery – maybe in anger over Grump's comments about his uncle or the fact that Themba seemed to have disappeared – stuck his tongue out.

That was not a clever thing to do and Themba's big brother swiftly retaliated by sticking out his foot, sending his adversary tumbling onto the ground and bruising his cheek. 'Oops! Did the pussycat fall, eh? Did it hurt itself, eh?'

Tiger, not too upset, cursed himself. *That was so stupid of me!*

The Basketballers laughed.

Something was running down his cheek and Tiger checked for blood. *Just mud.*

Themba's big brother counted, 'Eight, nine and ten. Out!'

Tiger remained on the ground in order not to make things worse. *I will never, ever – on my honor – be so stupid again.*

"Never knocked to the ground until now, eh?" asked Themba's brother, "Just like his uncle, eh? The second fastest loser in the world, eh?"

Tiger figured the boys had no good reason to hang around.

"You all realize that I've virtually knocked out Baby Baba, eh?"

The Basketballers obviously figured they had no reason to leave.

"A silly bum running around picking butts of the street; what do you think this guy's real father would have to say about that, eh?"

Tiger didn't like to listen to the tall boy, but he didn't move; standing up was simply not an option.

"I bet the little pussycat doesn't even know who his real father is, eh."

Though the earth was wet, it was also soft and Tiger didn't feel too uncomfortable.

"If he stays with his uncle - and we all know what a drunken no-good he is - can you imagine what his father must have been like, eh?"

Tiger thought back to his father. He didn't think much about him nowadays but the day he thought about was also the day that his uncle had become a new and totally different person; it had been three years ago and though Tiger had only been five years old at the time, yet he remembered it well. He had been staying with his father in a house that his uncle had given them when suddenly two policemen had burst through the front door – one of them had been a real detective.

"His real father probably died in the wasting disease too; why else would the pussycat team up with such a loser, eh?"

*

The other Basketballers had soon joined in the jeering and together they had performed some vigorous though not particularly well-choreographed war dances around Tiger while shouting all sorts of insults. Then - as the boys finally started to walk off - Themba's big brother had gestured wildly at his friends, giving a detailed description of all the terrible things he intended to do to the little pussycat the next time they met.

As the tall boys started to walk off, Tiger jumped up and hurried back into the shop. As Grump was nowhere to be seen he left the money on the counter - grabbed the basket and two chewing gums - and started running towards home. Now - having secured the milk, albeit at the price of a bruised cheek - Tiger felt much better, and as he ran past the Basketballers he once again stuck his tongue out.

Maybe this is not going to be such a bad day, after all, Tiger thought as Themba's big brother threw his curses after him. Tiger smiled to himself as he turned the last corner, but then, as he came to face the shack, he stopped dead at the horrifying sight.

*

Baba was dreaming and the theme - just like last night, the previous night and the night before that - was forgiveness and separation or "Mandela"; Nelson Mandela was Baba's symbol for separation. So far it had been a nice dream because wherever Baba had turned, somebody had given it to him - forgiveness. There was his father who forgave him for stealing some dry buck-meat that he had needed to eat himself up into light-middleweight. There was Baba's first promoter - the enormous, cruel, and legendarily unforgiving Seven B - who forgave him for never working out and even asking him back into his squad of boxers. There was the barman at his favorite tavern and Grump - the grumpy shop-owner - who both forgave him for not settling his tabs on the agreed dates. There were the social welfare people who forgave him for having no permanent income and for not registering his nephew for school. There was his nephew who forgave him for putting his hand into the water. *Putting my hand into the water? Why do I have to be forgiven for that?* There was a young girl from long ago who forgave him for not keeping his promise not to attempt anything beyond kissing her. There was his mother who forgave him for not buying her the fridge he had so long promised her. There was a doctor, a real one, who forgave him for using shoe-polish to camouflage the white spots in his hair. There were even two cute little leopard cubs that forgave him for what he had done to their mother for no other reason than to prove himself.

There were a few variations to the dream, especially the water-forgiveness; that was a new and strange one. Baba wished he could have woken up right now, just when so much was forgiven and before the ending, but however much he tried to, Baba couldn't wake up - he never could.

Chapter 2

He couldn't wake up and the end was still to come and to that, there was never a single variation; it was as if written in stone.

It all started with a head coming towards him as if through the floor of a boxing ring. Baba could only see a head full of hair slowly approaching – it was blond. Even though Baba felt he ought to know the head's owner, he couldn't put a name to it. Then, after what felt like an eternity the head finally reached through the ring floor and Baba recognized the man – it was Jonathan. The teenager smiled pleasantly and reached out his hand towards Baba.

Baba took the young man's hand, 'Jonathan? Is that you? Are you alive?'

'Yes, I'm Jonathan and I...'

At that moment, just as in all Baba's "Mandela dreams", there was a slight twitch in the young man's nose and his upper lip curled condescendingly. Then all skin and flesh rotted from Jonathan's face and body and Baba found himself holding nothing but bones in his hand and looking into the empty sockets of a skull.

'...I will never forgive you!' said the rattling jaws of the skull.

Then the image of Jonathan slowly faded away, but that was only part one of the nightmare's end.

The second part was very short; along came this old, black, wise-looking man – it was Mister Mandela – who looked him straight into the eyes while shaking his head in disappointment. In Baba's mental world Mister Mandela represented honor and it was honor – or rather, the lack of it – that wanted to separate him from the boy.

Mister Mandela looked at Baba in disappointment, 'You've brought dishonor upon yourself.'

Baba looked down into the ground, 'I'm sorry.'

Then Mister Mandela spoke again and the words he spoke were always the same, 'And the punishment for dishonoring yourself is that you and the boy must be separated.'

There was no forgiveness for Baba, not even in his dream – only separation.

*

Tiger looked in horror at the little yard that surrounded the shack. The yard - that formed a hollow in the ground - was completely flooded.

Tiger rushed across to where the current must have swept the waterwheel away, it was nowhere to be seen, and he ran up to the ditch. Up there he removed the stones that diverted the flow, rearranged them so that instead they sent the water back into its original path. Once that was done Tiger climbed down, hurried over to the edge of the water, took off his shoes, and started to wade towards the front door. As the water was still pushing into the shack the door proved impossible to open. Finally, the door gave way to Tiger's violent efforts only by crashing back on its hinges, nearly knocking him over. As he took a standing long jump out of both the water and the door's

path, Tiger let go of the basket in the water where it landed bottom down, immediately got caught by the incoming tide. As the basket sailed past him and into the shack the milk-bottle - quite miraculously - remained standing. Tiger hurried into the shed.

Inside there were snores, heavy snores. There was also a lake with all sorts of things - many of which Tiger figured had been thrown away or lost - floating about in it. There was a broken cricket bat, a tennis ball, and a long lost clown with a big yellow nose that he had accused Themba of stealing. *Maybe he stole it and then hid it.*

The first thing Tiger recovered was the old alarm clock that had fallen into the water; he emptied it of water, shook it, and even - hoping it would wake his uncle - got it to ring a little before setting the hand back to nine.

Apart from the snores temporarily ceasing, the ringing didn't wake his uncle, and instead, now he had even covered his head with its two white spots beneath the blanket.

Tiger then realized that maybe it would be a good thing if his uncle didn't wake up until the water was gone and things were back to normal. *Maybe I can even make coffee before he awakes.* Tiger started his rescue operation by salvaging what he knew his uncle cherished the most: the beer bottles – especially the full ones.

Though Tiger went about his business very quietly yet the clink of bottles succeeded where the alarm clock's ringing and the terrible dream had failed.

Baba opened a suspicious eye.

Tiger continued his rescue operation.

Baba, lying with his back to the noise – believing that somebody behind his back was carrying off his beer - dead still and moving only his arm, reached out for the knife. Baba's hand touched the shoe-polish instead. *If he sees my white spots...* His hand continued to where the knife ought to have been; there it rummaged around in vain until it eventually landed on the handle of the old umbrella. *It will have to do.*

Baba - like a pirate with his sword drawn – with amazing speed swung out of the bed with an aggressive roar, expecting to surprise a thief.

The aggressive roar then turned into one of surprise as Baba realized that the beer thief was none other than his nephew. Then - the very moment his rheumatic feet landed in the water - the roar changed once more, now into one of panic and pain. Baba - with the speed that had once nearly made him a titled contender - literally bounced back up into the bed.

Tiger gave his uncle an unnaturally big smile, 'I've got some milk and it's totally fresh.'

Only now - after overcoming the first shock - did Baba, now wide-awake, glance around the shack.

'I got it from Grump and I've paid for it.'

Chapter 2

Only now did Baba realize that he was marooned on an island and shut off from dry land by an ocean of water.

Tiger, well aware of his uncle's special relation to water, produced a second unnaturally big smile, 'Don't worry, it will soon be gone.'

'Where did all this come from?'

'It's been raining.'

'When?'

'Oh, for some time now; on and off.'

'The sun is shining; isn't it?'

'But it rained, I didn't think it could rain like that, it's a very strange day.'

'I didn't notice.'

'That's because you were asleep.'

'Of course, I was asleep!' Baba exploded, 'It's in the middle of the bloody morning, isn't it?'

Tiger didn't answer.

'Can't a man have some sleep in his own house?'

'What... what really happened...'

'What really happened was that you built another turn-thingy.'

'Waterwheel.'

'Turn-thingy! And then you ran away from it as usual.'

'I had to do something.'

'I had to do something.' Baba grunted, as he angrily started to dress, 'and of course, it never occurred to you that I might have drowned?'

'I didn't think there'd be so much water.'

Baba shook his head angrily.

Tiger spotted one of his uncle's shoes, being pulled along by the outgoing tide; it slowly approached the door; Tiger started after it. The old shoe was closely followed by the basket, now half sunk, with the milk-bottle, strangely, still standing. Behind the shoe, the basket and the Yellow-nosed clown, pathetically unable to affect his fate, was mercilessly pulled along with the receding water, towards the opening and an uncertain destiny.

'Silly child! Don't you understand anything?'

Tiger turned around to face his angry uncle.

'I thought it was you who was supposed to be the one with some think in his head.'

Tiger still didn't answer.

'Don't you realize what happens when you just do whatever you feel like?' Baba burst out. 'Haven't I told you a thousand times that water is dangerous?'

'Yes... you have.'

‘I hate water more than you hate hot milk; I can’t understand how somebody so small can be so stubborn!’

Tiger shrunk at his uncle’s outburst.

‘When you only think about yourself you become a bad person; you become an island and of no use to anybody. And to be of no use to anybody is really the same thing as to be useless.’

Tiger could recall seeing his uncle this angry before - even angrier, actually - but this was the first time he’d experienced such anger directed towards himself, at least towards himself alone.

‘People who don’t consider other people should be... should be put in prison!’

Tiger nodded, looking up at his uncle who looked strangely dangerous where he stood, high above him up on the bed.

‘And if the court doesn’t put them there, then they should punish themselves!’

‘What do you want me to do?’

‘You... I... What you deserve is for me to put you on the street and never take the least notice of you!’



Baba, like a pirate with his sword drawn...

