

Bending

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It was a balmy night, even for summer in the northeastern province of South Africa. Sbu stood between the rocks-cum-goalposts, hoping the other boys would keep the soccer game to the other side of the lot. It was too hot to hustle. Dume, the big kid with knock-knees broke through the cluster with the ball. He dribbled fast, snorting like a bull as he barreled towards Sbu.

Sbu's hands started to shake. He'd only taken goalie so he wouldn't have to run. Now it didn't seem like the best idea. His teammates scrambled behind Dume.

"Focus!" Sbu's father called out as he walked by. "You've done this a thousand times before!" Sbu felt the rest of the world dissolve. The other boys fell away. His feet took root. *No different than any other game. He's just a bit bigger* Sbu told himself.

Dume faked left. Sbu cut right. His foot caught the ball square on, bending it back to the far side of the lot. The boys spun around and ran the other way.

And then they collided. It was like hitting a wall at full speed. "Punk," Dume said kicking some dirt on him before he ran after the others.

Sbu rolled onto his back. From the corner of his eye he could see his father wave. Sbu waved back as he ducked down a narrow path to where neighbors were playing dice a row of shacks down the hill.

The township smelled like roasting meat and earth and sweat. Sbu took a deep breath in and felt the earth spin under him. "Good on ya," Simpiwe said trotting past, back to the game. "He's a BIG boy."

Pop-pop-pop. The boys hit the ground and scattered as gunshots tore through the lazy night. The shots were close. One row of houses away, where Sbu's father had gone. Simpiwe was face down with the ball pulled over his head like a helmet. Sbu belly-crawled over to him, grabbed his elbow and led him into his house. They slipped under his parents' bed and giggled at Simpiwe, still clinging to the ball. He bit Sbu's shoulder who squealed like a piglet. They laughed until it cramped their sides.

The front door clapped open and slammed shut with the weight of a body falling against it. There was no more laughing. From under the bed Sbu could see his father's boots brace in the dirt floor. Outside gunshots stuttered around the spinning of tiers. Simpiwe had his face under the ball again. The black leather of Sbu's father's boots darted past them to the back of the room where he kept a gun hidden.

"Da..." he whispered.

“Shh! Stay under the bed!” he hissed back. There was the creak of the door’s rusty hinges and then shots from his father’s gun, loud and immediate. Sbu nudged Simpiwe with his shoulder to make sure he was ok. He rolled his eyes and shook, pretended it was to tease him for being scared. The door slammed shut, his father dropping to all fours. “Stay here,” he said. He winked before he jumped up. Fast heavy footsteps. The window rattled open. “I’ll be right back for you,” his father said climbing out. The shack felt frail and mutable though they’d lived there for as long as he could remember. Sbu’s heart punched in his chest. The air seemed thicker. He couldn’t get a full breath. He had to get out. Simpiwe held him back as the gunshots started again, punctuated by the screeches of trucks forcing their way down too narrow streets.

The front door flew open. “Sbu!” his mother’s voice was sharp. He’d heard it like this once before; when his grandmother’s farm got caught in a mudslide. He climbed out from under the bed as fast as he could. She reached down and pulled Simpiwe out by the scruff. The gunshots stopped and the three stood motionless for a moment, holding onto the silence and each other. “Da said,” Sbu started. His mother covered his mouth with her hand.

There was a tinkling of breaking glass, the whoosh of flames and screams. Close and stomach churning. His mother grabbed the boys by the wrists and yanked them behind her out the window. All around them fire crackled up the sides of groaning metal walls that curled in their heat. They ran hunched over, ducking behind bins and into corners. They followed his mother to the south side of the neighborhood and up through the hole in the fence to the sugar cane fields above.

They dove into the shadows between rows and watched as others escaped into the field and the woods beyond. Simpiwe pointed to a collapsed house, “I think that’s my aunty’s,” he said. Sbu’s mom broke off pieces of sugarcane and handed it to him.

“Don’t say such things,” she said. “Eat.”

“Ma,” Sbu said tugging at her sleeve. “Da said he would be right back.”

“He came *home*?” She looked surprised.

“He told me to stay put. He was coming right back. We have to go get”

“Oh no you don’t.” She pulled Sbu back down into the dirt. “He’s a grown man.” She narrowed her eyes at a group of people stealing through the hole in the fence. “He left you there?”

“He was coming right back,” Sbu mumbled. She had that far away look she got sometimes. She wasn’t listening anymore.

Dawn brought quiet and a light ash filled rain that stuck to their skin and ran grey beads down their arms.

They walked home through the ravaged township. Fresh white placards were fixed to broken doors and posts. “If you want to live,” it said, “join the IFP. Freedom in 1992.” The Ikatha Freedom Party had been pasting them up for weeks though until now Sbu’d never given them much weight. His father used to tear them down and say “We’re African National Congress. If it’s good enough for Mandela, it’s good enough for us.” Without his father the signs had spread like lice over a sleeping dog.

“Ma...did you see those posters?”

“Hush. I don’t care for politics,” she said.

A heavy smell of strange burnt meat scathed their nostrils. Small crowds were forming around collapsed shacks. People lifted bent iron sheets to see if anyone was left inside. The body of a woman was pulled from one as they passed.

“No Malusi,” a man in a torn shirt said, rubbing his forehead.

“He might have been taken,” the man helping him said. Sbu scanned the crowds for his father. *Maybe someone took him too*, he thought. *Maybe they brought him somewhere safe like the cane field*. He pictured his father, still asleep, snorting when a fat fly danced around his nostrils.

On Sbu’s street two houses were flattened. Their own house hung at a forty-five degree angle, but it still stood. Sbu took it as a sign. His father had built the house. If it stood, he had to be standing too.

“Ma,” Sbu started. She shushed him with a wave of her hand.

“There will be a meeting this afternoon in the Hall. We’ll go and see from there. We’ll see.” Sbu inched closer to her and took her hand.

“I’m scared Ma.” He’d only said it so she didn’t have to.

“Don’t be.” She squeezed his hand. “We’re together. So long as we have each other, we’ll be ok.” A rock and rusted gas canister blocked their door. She pushed them aside with her foot. The house was empty and hot. The thickening miasma followed them in, creeping under their loosely fitting door and through the still open window.

The Community Hall was teeming. People packed tight into corners and too many to a row.

Something in Sbu felt different. It was the opposite of full. The way darkness feels when someone turns off a very bright light in the middle of the night.

A soccer ball struck the side of Sbu’s knee. A few feet away Simpiwe stood grinning. Behind him a group of boys scrambled, small feet with spindly legs jostled each other to get closer to the trashcan goal posts. For the first time in his life the game seemed silly. Sbu tossed the ball back. Simpiwe kicked it at him, nailing him in the chest. He smiled even wider and waved. Sbu sighed and looked inside the hall. His mother and grandmother were sitting at the edge of the third row. Beside them he vaguely recognized his neighbor Ayize’s cousin. The podium was filling with stern-faced men. At either end, bored looking cops played cards and read papers. Unease crept under his skin and wiggled through him, like a big man in a too small overcoat. There was nothing he could do. He was still a boy; his coming of age ceremony wasn’t even scheduled yet.

“Kick the ball, Sbu!” the kids shouted in an off-beat chorus. He kicked the ball back and ran out. “You’re with me!” Simpiwe shouted after him.

The meeting in the hall outlasted the game and the heat of the afternoon that ushered the boys into the shade of a nearby tree. Those that could went home. Sbu sat outside the entrance and waited. The sinking afternoon sky snared on rooftops and drying lines. Soft breezes rippled over his bare arms. Somewhere a dog barked. Everything looked as it always had. Intertwining dirt roads, heavily pot-holed and littered with bits of tire and empty packets stretched out before him.

Quilted together pieces of metal made up houses that hid full living rooms with quieted radios and well swept rugs.

Sbu leaned his head against the threshold and listened to the meeting inside. “They leave us no choice,” “My wife is gone,” “This is not politics,” people shouted out of turn at the now tired looking men on the stage. Sbu tried to see between the bodies and arms, craning for a glimpse of his grandmother’s scarf. He couldn’t find them. Sbu’s heart started racing. He looked around the empty square. All his friends had gone. For the moment, he was alone.

Three hours later a crowd stiller than a funeral procession trickled out onto the street. Sbu’s mother and granny walked whispering to one another. Sbu followed them, knowing better than to interrupt. His grandmother had unhooked the ANC badge from her shirt collar and was turning it over in her hand. “Truth is subjective, particularly in war. This is war.” Sbu’s mother opened her mouth as if to speak, then bit her breath and nodded. Granny played her fingers around the badge’s pin, “Your husband is not here Mbhali. He has left you to fend for yourself. You must make a choice. And the choice is clear. Not even he would argue.” Sbu’s father always argued. Sbu had heard him debating the color of the sky and the taste of chicken. An uneasy feeling latched to the roof of Sbu’s stomach. He glanced around patting his pockets. He was losing something.

“Life isn’t always what you planned for,” his granny said. “Sometimes you have to recognize the path you were on was the wrong one, be humble enough to admit it and strong enough to change. There are no promises. Your husband has made his choice, he’s not coming back.” Sbu’s mother stopped and shook her head.

“Don’t say that Ma. He’s coming back. He just went into hiding.”

“Not anymore,” Granny clapped her hand over her mouth. She shook her head and looked away.

“Ma?” Mbhali touched her arm. Granny closed her eyes.

“I saw him this morning. He couldn’t find you. He accused me of turning you in...” Sbu’s mother took her hand away and touched it to her mouth. “These men from the party came by. I was angry. He’d called me a traitor.”

Mbahli’s face went slack. “Oh Ma, what have you done?”

Granny tisk-ed and waved her hand. She squinted at something far off. “They just wanted to ask him some questions.” Mbhali gasped. Granny looked up at her daughter with small eyes. Mbahli couldn’t move. “He’s a stubborn man.” She placed the A.N.C. badge in Mbhali’s hand and closed limp fingers around it. “You have to be soft like a sapling, or when the north-western wind comes it pulls you up by the roots.” She squeezed her daughter’s hand closed into a fist. “Do with it what you like. I have no use for it anymore.” She forced a smile and waddled down her empty street, lifting her skirt daintily around litter to where her house stood, untouched.

Sbu’s mother swayed. She looked at the badge her mother had worn every day for the past sixteen years. The pin was loose and came off its clasp. She pushed her finger into it, bending the skin, but not quite breaking it.

“Ma?”

“Hush boy. I’m thinking,” she said, her legs wobbling a little as she walked away.

Sbu followed silently behind her, counting twenty-three IFP posters on their way home. One had been attached to a spigot, the trickling water boring its way through the poster, leaving only ‘Join’ and ‘live’ legible.

Back in the shack there was no sign of his father. His mother stood in the center of the room, her eyes searching every crevice of their home.

“Ma?” She didn’t answer. He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked down at his feet for what seemed like much too long.

“Come,” she said, grabbing a blanket and a bag of sliced bread. She led him without hurry back up to the sugarcane fields where they picked another row and settled in for the night. The pop-pop-pop and sour meat smell drifted up from the township below, lulling Sbu into fevered sleep filled with dreams he didn’t want to remember.

Sbu woke in the stillest point of the night. He scooted over so he could feel his mother next to him. She seemed small and easy to lose. The field that had once been so familiar was vast and infinite, like a sea that could reach out and drag his mother away at any moment. He wriggled even closer to her. She murmured and pulled away. The inch between them was huge. Sbu pressed his hands into the same ground he and every member of his family had been born on. Once upon a time he felt bound to and cradled by it. A breeze passed through the sugar cane leaves, rushing like water. The wave had come. It was he that was drifting out into infinity.

Mbahli woke him when it was barely light out. She looked grey like the morning. Sbu followed her back down through the hole in the fence. Three men waited outside their house. Sbu ran, thinking one might be his father. None of them was. It was his neighbor Ayize, an uncle and a man who said he worked in the navy yard with his father. Mbahli invited them in and told Sbu to fetch some water.

When Sbu came back, the front door was closed. He hesitated. Inside he could hear Ayize asking about a list. “I don’t know what you mean,” Mbahli said. “Did you go to the meeting yesterday? People are saying they saw your mother there,” he asked.

“No I was afraid,” she said. “I looked for my husband all day.” Her voice was tight and high-pitched. The way it was when his father had caught her hiding half her pay in her sock drawer. Sbu slipped into the shadowed house and towards the back to build a fire. He didn’t understand why she was lying. Ayize’s own cousin had been there. The men stood up before the coals had settled. They nodded quietly and left.

Mbahli sat back down and rubbed her face with her palms as if she were washing it. “Ma?” Sbu said. “Must I still make tea?”

After a heavy sigh she said, “No, leave it.”

She sat silently staring at the door. *Maybe she’s still waiting for him too*, Sbu thought. He felt bad for her. He knew his father wasn’t coming home. It was a feeling he had in the pit of his gut as clear as the shack around them.

A woman screamed next door. Sbu looked to his mother. She snapped her fingers and pointed under the bed. Sbu crawled under, his head still far enough out that he could see her creep to the door and peer out. She jumped back and shut the door quickly. Sbu crawled out from under the bed to peer through a gap in the wall as Ayize's cousin ran by, his hands dripping red. Mbhali opened the door again, just a crack and peered through. Other neighbors were running by. She followed hesitantly. So did Sbu. Neighbors collected around Ayize's door. Sbu wiggled his way through tightly packed bodies. Face down in the dirt of his living room floor was Ayize, a large kitchen knife sticking out of his back. Maroon stains formed strange polka dots on his shirt. Mbhali kneeled by his face, slapping his cheek and saying his name a bit too loud. Ayize's second wife was passed out in an old man's arms, mouth open, arms splayed out and heart turned up to the sky. Before his mother could notice, Sbu slipped back through the crowd and under the bed.

The front door creaked open. Sbu could make out his mother's bare feet walking by. "Ma?" he called out from under the bed. She stopped where she was. Sbu peeked out. She looked older. Her eyes drooped, her chin quivered and she shook her head. "What happened?" Sbu asked.

She rubbed at a dark stain on her skirt. "You can make that tea now."

Sbu's mother sat staring out the window, the tea now cold in her lap. There was a knock at the door. Sbu opened it and jumped back: three men wearing IFP t-shirts stood in the threshold. The tallest one, with a cleanly shaven face and a scar on his right cheek, smiled and bent down. "Afternoon, little Comrade. Is your mother home?"

Mbhali pushed Sbu out of the way and ushered them in. "Go out and play," she said. Sbu didn't want to play. He wanted to run. But he couldn't leave her in there alone. Instead he crouched by the back window and listened.

"We want to say how happy we were to see you at the meeting on Thursday. The movement could use a few strong women like you and your mother. Mrs. Florence has become an integral part of the movement. Your husband must be very proud." There was a pause and no answer. "We couldn't help but notice, your brother wasn't at any of the meetings." Again, a pause with no response.

"Sister Comrade, he's only a man. All men have faults to be forgiven. We must unite to be strong and weed out those that make us weak. This is for the greater good, for the future of your country. Think of your son."

"He lives by the north entrance." Mbhali's voice was hollow.

That night they stayed home. No trucks came, no shots rang out. Yet in the morning twenty-seven bodies were found in their own homes, stabbed with sharpened bicycle spokes, screw drivers, and kitchen knives.

Days turned into weeks filled with funerals and digging. The faces all around him were heavy with grief and guilt. Neighbors and family members kept close eyes on each other, waiting to be denounced. No one and nothing looked the same. His grandmother whispered names and people were found limp in their beds. He wondered about the God she had taught him to fear and if she remembered to fear him too. He answered every question she had with as fast a "Yes, Madam," as he could spit out. She didn't seem like a granny anymore.

His mother seemed different too. No matter how hard he tried, Sbu was always in her way. He did his chores and homework as quietly as possible. Still she screamed and cried more than he had ever seen her do. He wondered if he'd followed the wrong lady home from the sugarcane fields.

At night Sbu slept on his side, his back to the wall hugging a metal tray under his shirt. In his dreams he was inside a tight wooden box. Dirt and pebbles were thrown on top. They made the sound of rain on a tin roof as they trickled down the sides. He couldn't breathe or move.

One morning Sbu woke with a start, a single thought running through his mind: *I'm all alone*. It was him against the future barreling down on him. His father was gone. His mother was paralyzed between a past she didn't want to give up and a future she didn't know how to maneuver. His heart started to race. His throat closed up the way it did in his dreams. Sbu closed his eyes and pulled in a shallow breath.

"Focus," Sbu heard his father say. "You've done this a thousand times before." He opened his eyes. It was still the same shack. He was on the same bed he'd always slept on. His arms and legs and hands were all the same. *Focus* he told himself. *It's no different than any other game, just a bit bigger.*

He sat up and looked around the darkness. In the far corner his mother was sleeping. Outside a breeze passed and shook the leaves in the trees. He felt his mind sway and bend into it. Sbu swung his legs over the side of the bed and pressed his feet into the ground. It didn't matter what wind blew, he was taking root.

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