
Opening Extract from...

The Girl Who Saved the King of Sweden

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THE GIRL WHO SAVED THE KING OF SWEDEN

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The statistical probability that an illiterate in 1970s Soweto will grow up and one day find herself confined in a potato truck with the Swedish king and prime minister is 1 in 45,766,212,810.

According to the calculations of the aforementioned illiterate herself.

PART ONE

The difference between stupidity and genius is that genius has its limits.

– *Unknown*

CHAPTER 1

On a girl in a shack and the man who posthumously helped her escape it

In some ways they were lucky, the latrine emptiers in South Africa's largest shantytown. After all, they had both a job and a roof over their heads.

On the other hand, from a statistical perspective they had no future. Most of them would die young of tuberculosis, pneumonia, diarrhoea, pills, alcohol or a combination of these. One or two of them might get to experience his fiftieth birthday. The manager of one of the latrine offices in Soweto was one example. But he was both sickly and worn-out. He'd started washing down far too many painkillers with far too many beers, far too early in the day. As a result, he happened to lash out at a representative of the City of Johannesburg Sanitation Department who had been dispatched to the office. A Kaffir who didn't know his place. The incident was reported all the way up to the unit director in Johannesburg, who announced the next day, during the morning coffee break with his colleagues, that it was time to replace the illiterate in Sector B.

Incidentally it was an unusually pleasant morning coffee break. Cake was served to welcome a new sanitation assistant. His name was Piet du Toit, he was twenty-three years old, and this was his first job out of college.

The new employee would be the one to take on the Soweto problem, because this was how things were in the City of Johannesburg. He was given the illiterates, as if to be toughened up for the job.

No one knew whether all of the latrine emptiers in Soweto really were illiterate, but that's what they were called anyway. In any case, none of them had gone to school. And they all lived in shacks. And had a terribly difficult time understanding what one told them.

* * *

Piet du Toit felt ill at ease. This was his first visit to the savages. His father, the art dealer, had sent a bodyguard along to be on the safe side.

The twenty-three-year-old stepped into the latrine office and couldn't help immediately complaining about the smell. There, on the other side of the desk, sat the latrine manager, the one who was about to be dismissed. And next to him was a little girl who, to the assistant's surprise, opened her mouth and replied that this was indeed an unfortunate quality of shit – it smelled.

Piet du Toit wondered for a moment if the girl was making fun of him, but that couldn't be the case.

He let it go. Instead he told the latrine manager that he could no longer keep his job because of a decision higher up, but that he could expect three months of pay if, in return, he picked out the same number of candidates for the position that had just become vacant.

'Can I go back to my job as a permanent latrine emptier and earn a little money that way?' the just-dismissed manager wondered.

'No,' said Piet du Toit. 'You can't.'

One week later, Assistant du Toit and his bodyguard were back. The dismissed manager was sitting behind his desk, for what one might presume was the last time. Next to him stood the same girl as before.

'Where are your three candidates?' said the assistant.

The dismissed apologized: two of them could not be present. One had had his throat slit in a knife fight the previous evening. Where number two was, he couldn't say. It was possible he'd had a relapse.

Piet du Toit didn't want to know what kind of relapse it might be. But he did want to leave.

'So who is your third candidate, then?' he said angrily.

'Why, it's the girl here beside me, of course. She's been helping me with all kinds of things for a few years now. I must say, she's a clever one.'

'For God's sake, I can't very well have a twelve-year-old latrine manager, can I?' said Piet du Toit.

'Fourteen,' said the girl. 'And I have nine years' experience.'

The stench was oppressive. Piet du Toit was afraid it would cling to his suit.

'Have you started using drugs yet?' he said.

'No,' said the girl.

'Are you pregnant?'

'No,' said the girl.

The assistant didn't say anything for a few seconds. He really didn't want to come back here more often than was necessary.

'What is your name?' he said.

'Nombeko,' said the girl.

'Nombeko what?'

'Mayeki, I think.'

Good Lord, they didn't even know their own names.

'Then I suppose you've got the job, if you can stay sober,' said the assistant.

'I can,' said the girl.

'Good.'

Then the assistant turned to the dismissed manager.

'We said three months' pay for three candidates. So, one month for one candidate. Minus one month because you couldn't manage to find anything other than a twelve-year-old.'

'Fourteen,' said the girl.

Piet du Toit didn't say goodbye when he left. With his bodyguard two steps behind him.

The girl who had just become her own boss's boss thanked him for his help and said that he was immediately reinstated as her right-hand man.

'But what about Piet du Toit?' said her former boss.

'We'll just change your name – I'm sure the assistant can't tell one black from the next.'

Said the fourteen-year-old who looked twelve.

* * *

The newly appointed manager of latrine emptying in Soweto's Sector B had never had the chance to go to school. This was because her mother had had other priorities, but also because the girl had been born in South Africa, of all countries; furthermore, she was born in the early 1960s, when the political leaders were of the opinion that children like Nombeko didn't count. The prime minister at the time made a name for himself by asking rhetorically why the blacks should go to school when they weren't good for anything but carrying wood and water.

In principle he was wrong, because Nombeko carried shit, not wood or water. Yet there was no reason to believe that the tiny girl would grow up to socialize with kings and presidents.

Or to strike fear into nations. Or to influence the development of the world in general.

If, that is, she hadn't been the person she was.

But, of course, she was.

Among many other things, she was a hardworking child. Even as a five-year-old she carried latrine barrels as big as she was. By emptying the latrine barrels, she earned exactly the amount of money her mother needed in order to ask her daughter to buy a bottle of thinner each day. Her mother took the bottle with a 'Thank you, dear girl,' unscrewed the lid, and began to dull the never-ending pain that came with the inability to give oneself or one's child a future. Nombeko's dad hadn't been in the vicinity of his daughter since twenty minutes after the fertilization.

As Nombeko got older, she was able to empty more latrine barrels each day, and the money was enough to buy more than just thinner. Thus her mum could supplement the solvent with pills and booze. But the girl, who realized that things couldn't go on like this, told her mother that she had to choose between giving up or dying.

Her mum nodded in understanding.

The funeral was well attended. At the time, there were plenty of people in Soweto who devoted themselves primarily to two things: slowly killing themselves and saying a final farewell to those who had just succeeded in that endeavour. Nombeko's mum died when the girl was ten years old, and, as mentioned earlier, there was no dad available. The girl considered taking over where her mum had left off: chemically building herself a permanent shield against reality. But when she received her first pay cheque after her mother's death, she decided to buy something to eat instead. And when her hunger was alleviated, she looked around and said, 'What am I doing here?'

At the same time, she realized that she didn't have any immediate alternatives. Ten-year-old illiterates were not the prime candidates on the South African job market. Or the secondary ones, either. And in this part of Soweto there was no job market at all, or all that many employable people, for that matter.

But defecation generally happens even for the most wretched people on our Earth, so Nombeko had one way to earn a little money. And once her mother was dead and buried, she could keep her salary for her own use.

To kill time while she was lugging barrels, she had started counting them when she was five: 'One, two, three, four, five . . .'

As she grew older, she made these exercises harder so they would continue to be challenging: 'Fifteen barrels times three trips times seven people carrying, with another one who sits there doing nothing because he's too drunk . . . is . . . three hundred and fifteen.'

Nombeko's mother hadn't noticed much around her besides her bottle of thinner, but she did discover that her daughter could add and subtract. So during her last year of life she started had calling upon her each time a delivery of tablets of various colours and strengths was to be divided among the shacks. A bottle of thinner is just a bottle of thinner. But when pills of 50, 100, 250 and 500 milligrams must be distributed according to desire and financial ability, it's important to be able to tell the difference between the four kinds of arithmetic. And the ten-year-old could. Very much so.

She might happen, for example, to be in the vicinity of her immediate boss while he was struggling to compile the monthly weight and amount report.

'So, ninety-five times ninety-two,' her boss mumbled. 'Where's the calculator?'

'Eight thousand seven hundred and forty,' Nombeko said.

'Help me look for it instead, little girl.'

'Eight thousand seven hundred and forty,' Nombeko said again.

'What's that you're saying?'

'Ninety-five times ninety-two is eight thousand seven hund—'

'And how do you know that?'

'Well, I think about how ninety-five is one hundred minus five, ninety-two is one hundred minus eight. If you turn it round and subtract, it's eighty-seven together. And five times eight is forty. Eighty-seven forty. Eight thousand seven hundred and forty.'

'Why do you think like that?' said the astonished manager.

'I don't know,' said Nombeko. 'Can we get back to work now?'

From that day on, she was promoted to manager's assistant.

But in time, the illiterate who could count felt more and more frustrated because she couldn't understand what the supreme powers in Johannesburg wrote in all the decrees that landed on the manager's desk. The manager himself had a hard time with the words. He stumbled his way through every Afrikaans text, simultaneously flipping through an English dictionary so that the unintelligible letters were at least presented to him in a language he could understand.

'What do they want this time?' Nombeko might ask.

'For us to fill the sacks better,' said the manager. 'I think. Or that they're planning to shut down one of the sanitation stations. It's a bit unclear.'

The manager sighed. His assistant couldn't help him. So she sighed, too.