

Umfaan's Heroes by Jon Elkon This is Chapter One!

Hallo. My name is Thomas Bloch. I am lying in a bed in a military hospital. This is 1967. This body I am wearing is full of holes, dents, cuts and bruises. It is slowly growing together again. And when it is satisfactorily regrown, they are going to hang it.

Around me bustles the army camp called Tempe, in the middle of that blood and sweat and tear-stained country called South Africa: a stupid name for a country. It will be called Azania after the Revolution.

This body is smallish, about five foot ten - but it's a well-formed thing with good proportions and I would be happy with it if it weren't for the pain. The hair is a little too fuzzy and the nose just a bit too big. I will have just turned seventeen when they hang me.

I entered this body at ten in the morning in February 1949. This was a good time to be born, as this, early in the morning there was a fresh shift of doctors and nurses in the Brentwood Nursing Home, so they didn't fuck up my grand entrance. So I'm an Aquarian, one of the people for whom this current age is supposed to have been made. I haven't as yet come across any evidence to support this theory.

I want to tell you how I got here, how I ended up in this hospital, and why all these people keep pestering me with their stupid questions.

It began when I met Pieter. Or when we met Absolom. Or when my mother met my father. Or when the world began.

I sometimes think that I know everything, see every thing, remember all my past lives, can see into other people's past lives, am, in other words, omniscient and possibly God. Pieter tells me that I cannot possibly be God, as he was told on good authority that God was killed by a number 37 bus in 1973. Since this is in the future, I will have to explain all that. Or I will let Pieter do it.

I don't really have the time to trace the history of the earth and show how it landed me here sore all over. Also, I can't get enough paper in this stupid place. I have to beg Nurse Van Tonder to get it for me. She isn't sympathetic. 'Why you got to waste your time on this? Why you don't write to your mother?'

Mommy and Daddy came to visit me last week, when I still had bandages wrapped around most of me. All I wanted was a piss, and I couldn't call Van Tonder to bring the bottle because that would offend the parents. As a result I must have seemed pretty rude. Mother left in tears. I always manage to squeeze water out of her for some reason. It's never my fault.

Time warp. Johannesburg 1948. Everything in black and white except for a couple of specks of pallid colour. A grimy smoke-smearred station. Full of all races of swarming people and loud with the *Ouf-wheeze* of steam trains pulling in and out.

A particular train. They called it the Blue Train. Its carriages are squeaky-clean and paneled in yellow-wood and mahogany and the First Class carriages are modeled on the Orient Express.

We have to pass those and go to the Second Class. I'll spare you the Third Class because that's too much like India. A particularly handsome young man at a train window, bidding his mother goodbye. She is pressing packages into his reluctant hands - cold chicken, biscuits, sandwiches, tomatoes already

splitting and mus ty boiled eggs flaking bits of calcium dandruff. Little Jewish lady in a shawl, her eyes with tears. Inside the carriage, his best friend Phil who has no mother is bidding a noisy and embarrassing goodbye to a girl friend.

Handsome Danny is embarrassed because he's twenty-eight years old and unmarried, and his mother is making a scene. He is in the process of becoming a successful businessman in a very small way - with rocking horses. He gives his mama more than half his earnings. She thinks he's a bit funny - but vunderful. She also thinks he's crazy to work so hard when he should be going out and finding a pretty Jewish girl to marry.

She wipes a tear with a comer of her shawl. At least, I suppose she did, in official Jewish mama fashion. 'Are you sure you're all right, Danny. Are you sure you've got everything.'

'Yes yes, as long as everything's all right with you.'

'Don't you worry about your mama. I looked after me and your father and you with nothing. Why shouldn't I be all right?'

'Well, look after yourself . . .'

'Don't you worry. I looked after before you gave me the ten pounds a week. I can look after for three weeks.'

Daniel is annoyed again. She could always turn any discussion into a guilt-laden bog.

'Have you brought the shirt I bought you?' She means the new yellow silk shirt she bought out of her housekeeping - which Daniel gives her. She had ironed it with a cool iron, and folded it and left it on Danny's bed so that he would find it when he got home from work. Danny had seen it there, been annoyed, and had a gravy-match with her over dinner.

'Yes.'

'Have you brought your yarmulka? There must be a shul there.'

'Oh God, Mama, I'm not going to shul on holiday—'

'Wash your mouth!' The train jerks and whistles. Or perhaps the guard whistles. 'Have a vunderful time! And go to shul, hear?'

Fluttering handkerchiefs. Steam. Shrieking from Marcia inside the carriage as she realises that the train is going too fast for her to alight. .. and Danny's friend Phil has removed most of her clothes. Marcia was the only person who had come to say goodbye to Phil. Both his parents had died in a car crash when he was five. Now he sold insurance, moderately successfully, and had developed a wide-boy image to go with the profes sion. Twirly moustache, wide-lapelled suit, natty hat. He was also Danny's best friend and had involved my father-to-be in many scrapes in their army days.

Mama hated him. Partly because he wasn't Jewish.

What Phil and Danny did with Marcia between Johannesburg and Kroonstad, the next station - where she staggered off in giggly dishabille - will not be told here.

Danny was amazingly good-looking at that time. I found a photograph of him from his army days in Gran's shed. Brown, Jewish-curly hair framing a Rupert Brooke face with that terribly attractive air-brushed blush in the cheeks.

Let's go back to Johannesburg station two days later.

A chauffeur-driven Bentley draws up at the entrance. Black chauffeur with

a deep-faced, moth-eaten look.

The car is nearly as moth-eaten as its driver. It's nine years old. Cancerous rust-spots bloom between paint and metal. The leather seats are seamed and lined like an old Eskimo.

On the back seat is a pale, thin girl of nineteen. Her make-up is sparse and smudged with recent tears. Her hair hangs naturally over bony shoulders. She looks like a white rose in an antique velvet-lined box.

She leans forward, placing her elegant little hand confidentially on the back of Jim's seat. Thank you, Jim.' She tips forward a tiny bit more and drops a half-crown on to his lap. He pockets it so quickly it appears to vanish into another dimension.

'I'll carry the bag,' he says, making no move to get out or open her door or carry her bag.

'No, don't worry. I'll get a porter!' she says, knowing Jim wants to get back as quickly as possible.

Jim wants to get back before the Wicked Stepmother discovers that he has used the family Bentley to convey her acquired relative to the station.

Jim lost his job when he returned. The Wicked Stepmother was furious that Jim hadn't been there when she had wanted to go shopping. She justified the sacking to her husband by listing Jim's real and imaginary faults and misdemeanours. He nodded and sighed and said Yes Dear and lost an old friend.

'Please be careful. Miss Anne,' says Jim. He loves the young miss, though he thinks her too thin. He loves the way her little tits bob about in the yellow (yes yellow) silk blouse. He has loved her for ten years. When she had left home a year ago after an argument with Hazel (she had wanted to go to university and the W.S. had resisted because of what she had considered to be Horrific Costs) Jim had clandestinely helped her move to the flat she shared with a friend I'll call Sylvia, because I've forgotten her name. Only Jim and Anne's father knew that Anne was working for a rather radical bookshop in town. Had the W.S. known that she would have died with shame.

'It's only a holiday, Jim/ she laughed. 'Sylvia will meet me at Muizenberg station. I'll be all right.' She alights elegantly. She goes to the boot and lugs out the huge trunk. She staggers around to the driver's window. 'Goodbye, Jim.' He doesn't answer. He puts the car in gear and drives off with a fugitive tear losing itself in the ploughed ridges of his honest face. Good bye, Jim.

Anne goes off to meet her fate in Muizenberg.

And to meet my father-to-be.

She was independent and brave for her time. Going on a 1,000-mile journey alone wasn't usual for young ladies from Johannesburg's Northern Suburbs. Not that she would meet too much danger in First Class.

In 1948 General Smuts and the United Party lost the general election. In the post-war era it was common for the people to throw off the heroic governments who had led them in war.

In South Africa the Blacks, Coloureds, Indians, Bushmen and Jews quaked. The latter quaked because the incoming Nationalists had openly supported the Nazis during the war. Many had been interned — including John Vorster, who became Prime Minister much later.

For the browner races, things looked black indeed.

By that date the Blacks were becoming more militant and the official implementation of the Apartheid policy consolidated resistance. While the majority of them were scattered over the country in little subsistence- economy communities, there were also growing townships all around the industrial centres. Since the 'thirties, young Blacks had been flowing into the townships in search of money, food, booze and sex away from the rigid tribal laws. Their ramshackle dwellings riddled with children, dogs, scrawny chickens. By the 'sixties, the crime rate in Soweto outstripped New York.

The Afrikaners weren't the first authors of black misery. They were carrying on a long colonial tradition. It was the English-dominated administration who, in 1936, removed black voting rights. In exchange they allocated 13 per cent of the country to the Blacks.

Even in 1948 some of the Whites realised, with a prickle at the back of their necks, that one day the Blacks would have a revenge that would never be forgotten. Anne and Daniel knew. They both hated the Nationalists and their racism. It was something they had in common, on that beach at Muizenberg and ever afterwards.

I don't know what the first words they said to each other were. I do know that at one stage there was something like a life-or-death battle between Danny and Phil for Anne's attention. Poor Phil ended up with too-fat Sylvia, three kids, a divorce, a massive bankruptcy and then, inevitably, suicide.

Muizenberg was a valiant attempt by Victorians to re-create Brighton in Africa. They built a wondrous sea-encroaching pier covered in wrought-iron scrolls and foliage. They built white stuccoed beachfront hotels, where Coloured waiters clucked and fussed over the rich fat moneybags from Joeys and their kids. Unfortunately the illusion was wrecked by the forty-foot waves and the beach of real sand.

On the day Anne and Daniel met, the white beach was a flurry of multi-coloured umbrellas, children, nannies and white folks generally stuffing themselves with cakes and sandwiches.

Further up the coast was a beach for Blacks. No chalets. Just a few umbrellas.

Anne and Daniel didn't think about *them* at all.

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