

EXCERPT

Afrika Road

HERE are many roads and lanes and streets and byways in South Africa but none quite like me, Afrika Road.

Each black township, no matter where it is situated, has an Afrika Road of its own. We are commonly known as "The Tar Road", and those who create the townships and make the laws also conceive roads like us to facilitate the easy mobility of military and police vehicles. Usually there is a single road into and out of the townships. But the black people say they are not fools. They know the real motives of the rulers.

I am long and black and beautiful like a flat piece of liquorice. Some folks say that my beauty has been spoiled by the obstinate white line because it cuts into my melanic majesty. But the line, like the Law of the land, slithers defiantly from the sun's bedroom in the west where I begin, to Masphala Hill in the east — a hotseat of conferred power which houses the Bantu Council Chambers and the police station.

I, Afrika Road, know and have endured the weight and pressure of all sorts of moving objects: human, animal and mechanical. I groaned under the grinding repression of many military convoys and police brass bands that led the mayoral processions to the Hill of power. I also witness weddings and childbirths, and hear the noise of speeding police cars and ambulances, as well as the plaintive burial dirges of people weeping mournfully as they go. I hear the cries of the lonely of heart and I am familiar with the bustling din of jubilant folk whose merriment and laughter permeate the ghetto.

I am a mighty road.

All the dusty and soil-eroded lanes and streets converge on my body, bringing throngs of panting people. And I hold them all on my sturdy lap, year in and year out; birth in and death out.

There was a time when I was a teeming cauldron of "people on the boil". The flames of mob anger and violence had razed the homes and businesses of men and women who threw in their lot and collaborated with the rulers of the land, or so the people said. Policemen and suspected informers and agents were brutally attacked. Some were even put to the torch. Yet amid the fear and frenzy of the marching and shouting masses, I, Afrika Road, caught glimpses of genuine gaiety on the people's faces. It was a welcome paradox nonetheless. Humour and anger marching side-by-side.

That day the marchers varied in shade between chocolate brown and shining ebony and fair apricot-skinned activists — rich characteristics for the human centipede that took to the streets.

It was one of many dates anywhere on the calendar of black resistance. The masses had heaved and swayed and breathed in the wild wind of their own passions. Occasionally the main body of the crowd opened up its floodgates and swallowed several hundreds of new protesters and their assortment of crude weaponry: sticks, stones, axes, home-made swords, knives and dustbin lids. Four hundred people poured out of Mpanza Street; five hundred from Matambo and a half-drunk dozen from Sis Sonti's shebeen. The call to arms had a magnetic pull even for the imbibers. A soldier was a soldier drunk or sober, or so the leaders said. What mattered most were numbers.

Between Goba and Zamani streets, where the elite owner-built homes stand proud and indifferent, only three youngsters joined the swelling ranks. The Mkhuku Shanty Town dwellers mingled eagerly in their hundreds. The march gained momentum. Men, women, children and the fire-eating T-shirted comrades — soldiers without uniforms or conventional armoury, were carried along the hard journey of insurrection, aware that death waited for them on Masphala Hill.

And they sang defiantly.

Songs that challenged and mocked the armed keepers of the Hill; that hated Hill which many blacks see as one of countless links in the chain of bondage and humiliation, or so the people said. Those who served in State-created institutions and sought and found sanctuary inside the high barbed-wire walls of the Hill, were branded puppets, sellouts and "mpimpi!" — the word used to describe informers and fifth-columnists.

I, Afrika Road, bore that maddened crowd as it rambled and swayed in the fervour of revolt towards the Hill of confrontation where hundreds of heavily-armed battalions of soldiers, policemen and the local "greenbean" law enforcers kept vigil. Their automatic weapons caught flashes of the shimmering gold and orange sunrays that blistered from a cloudless sky. The singing reached fever pitch when a group of chanting, flag-carrying militant youth took the lead towards the waiting death-machine.

The songs spoke of imminent battle and vengeance, and of the people's hunger for libera-

'I am a mighty African road' ...

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tion. Songs which exhorted the Bothas to release Nelson Mandela and all the other political prisoners. There were martial strophes which alluded to the impending acquisition of AK47s, Scorpion automatic pistols and bazooka rocket launchers. Then came the electrifying toyi-toyi war dance which appeared to penetrate and possess the very souls of the marchers. It seemed to me that the masses yearned to touch the faces of death or victory — whichever came first.

The toyi-toyi is a ritual dance which people have come to fear and hate or love and revere depending on which side of the political trenches a person stood — with the masses or the "masters".

A truly awe-inspiring sight, thousands of angry and anxious feet in an exuberant display of bravado and daring. Up and down, back and forth; then forward and ever onward — spilling the froth and sweat of excitement on my black brow.

And I, Afrika Road, saw schoolchildren in khaki uniforms raise their wooden guns at the

law enforcers on the Hill. Bullets made of hot breath and noise and spit, reverberated in the air. "We are going to kill them in the company of their children," the khaki-clad warriors chanted. Death waited for them on the Hill as the crowd drew closer and closer. It would be the final confrontation: more than sixty thousand marchers heading for the showdown. Heading for freedom, or so they said.

You see it in their youthful eyes: a readiness to feel the familiar thud on the chest, and to hear the cracking of bone and the ripping of lung as the fire-power of the law enforcers makes its forced entry and exit through the dark dissident flesh.

You see it in the flailing young arms of the children — always the children in the firing line — in tattered clothes or in school uniforms; T-shirted or naked chests; you see their hands fisted in the ardour of transient emotions; lives destined never to fully experience the essence of a natural childhood. You see them.

And I, Afrika Road, have seen them rise and then run undaunted against the ill wind; falling but emerging anew through sheaves of resisting corn — giving the earth life that genuine life might be reborn — or so I have heard the people's poets say during the many long marches.

A late model car zoomed out of a small, non-descript lane between Zwide and Zwane streets. The well-dressed, well-fed driver, a wealthy local businessman and Bantu councillor, was en route to his sanctuary on Masphala Hill. He swerved noisily on to me. People dived to safety as the expensive imported vehicle screeched, skidded and smoked at the wheels, and burned me.

Someone shouted "Mpimpi!"

The human telegraph wire relayed the hated word and echoed it against the blue sky. The leaders in front got the message, stopped and gave their backs to the waiting militia, who instinctively raised their guns at the ready in anticipation of attack.

The laminated windows of the car sagged under the weight of flying rock. Some of the youngsters jumped on it and smashed the front windscreen. The terror-stricken man sat open-mouthed, immobilised by his fear of death.

And I, Afrika Road, watched; knowing the fateful outcome. I have witnessed it too many times.

"Mpimpi!"

The chilling indictment rang out one final time.

A huge stone crushed the driver's skull. His eyes blinked and then went blank. Blood poured from his ears, nose and mouth. They dragged him out. The back of his head cracked against me. I drank his blood just like I tasted the blood of many before him, and many more to come.

It is the law and the legacy.

Someone rolled a tyre. Someone lifted a petrol can. Someone struck a match on Afrika Road...

● *Afrika Road* from *The Storyteller*, a collection of short stories by Don Mattera (Justified Press, R28,85)

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