Qenehelo

Forgotten Kingdom

Lesotho is a country God has abandoned since Genesis, inside South Africa. Among the countries in South Africa with their own independence, Lesotho is one of the forgotten. Lesotho is full of mountains, The Drakensberg Mountains and are known for our smoking waterfalls, ‘‘Semokong.’’ We call them Semonkong because of the mist that creates a smoky cloud over the hills, as rays of sunshine release multiple rainbows on a clear day. The country has been robbed of its valuables too many times. The king of the country dreams of being his great grandfather, who led people through catastrophes. The people are very traditional and true to the culture. Smiles are plenty, the one wealth my village has. Poverty is an uninvited and permanent friend in the villages. “CHAIVI,” as my father called it, HIV-AIDS, has ripped the country apart, like hail does to our plants. Orphans are found on every door, dreaming of a good meal to last for days. Grandmothers who take care of the orphans drink too much homemade beer and shove tobacco-snuff up their noses. They can’t bear the stress. Orphans become herd boys and school is a dream that rarely becomes a reality. Cows are plenty in the village, everywhere. They’re how people produce food and practice the barter system.

Out of ten districts in the country, Butha-Buthe is mine. There is a village, Hamolapo, full of tall stick poles with green and white cloths tied at the top to direct people to the home-made beer. I’m a young boy in this village in other people’s eyes. I appear hopeless, but I live a better life in my head. My mother is gone. I have broken my promise that if my mother ever died leaving me alone in this world, I would kill myself because now I have the responsibility to care for my dying father. He is sick from work in the mines. I hate the mines.

We have chickens at my house. They are my alarm clock and special holiday meals. I don't like how the one-eyed rooster ruins my food growing in the garden, which are my mother's last seeds left since the sunset took her forever, but the rooster wakes me up early. In the morning he is a good rooster, but in the evenings when I see my plants he is my meat in the bank. He makes the first crow, on the corner of the hut I sleep in. I wake up and toss dried corn as a thank you to him. I take the water bucket and head to the spring. It's only a 10 liter because we must share the water. Sometimes I find the spring empty and that ruins my day. I feel that small containers and sharing helps more of us get water. On my walk to the spring, I pass my mother. I marked her grave with blue paint. Blue is my favorite color.

"Good Morning, mama. It's cold today, the duck water damn is frozen on top, but when the sun comes out, they shall be able to swim. I will kill one duck on Sunday," I say to mama's grave as I stop, kiss a small rock, and place it on her resting place. We do this to respect lost loved ones in my culture.

I continue for the spring. I don't want to wait too long in line because I will be late to the rest of what I must do. Lines at the spring are long in the morning and it can take fifty minutes for one person to fill up a bucket. I get to the spring and Pulane is already there. Pulane helps out her pregnant sister whose husband died too young in the mines. She is beautiful and has big brown eyes which I'm often caught staring into too long. She has seen me shed a tear and I care deeply about her. She sees my sad face and knows I was at my mother's grave.

"Look at who woke up at the end of the bed, with his head facing his legs," Pulane says. Her laugh is making me feel better. "I brought the 20 litre bucket on my head today; put some of the water in your 10 litre, so we don't have to wait for you to fill up, that way we can get to school early. You know how much they like to punish us at the gate of the school."

"Pulane, you know too well that children are put to sleep before the first night chickens crow, so of course you woke up before I did. Besides, we boys stay up all night to make sure beautiful faces like yours get their beauty sleep." I hold her cold hands and blow warm air into them. She smiles, and punches me lightly on the chest. We laugh. That feeling of wanting to cry, passing my mother's grave, slowly disappears.

As Pulane and I walk home, we swap buckets, and I carry her bigger one. She puts mine on her head, with no hands holding it and she walks next to me. I say hi to Mama Letlola, the witch doctor in my village. She is always at the spring early, too. Her home is not far from mine and I hear her at night playing her drums and practicing her magic. When she plays in the night, I dance to the beat often in my hut. I am good with an African drum. When you are hungry and the sun is over a hundred degrees, a good puff and the euphonic rhythm of an African drum can be so pleasant that you forget your problems.

"Pleasant morning, Mama Letlola, "I say.

"Dear—kea leboha ngoanaka (Thank you my child)."

We leave Mama Letlola at the spring. I head home. Pulane and I will see each other at school.

When I get home I put the water away and quickly go to the corral. I let the cows and goats out. The goats run to the front. The cows follow behind. I like how the goats move faster, because it saves time. It's a distance to the mountains where the animals must graze. Once I am past the houses, I yell the cows' names, and they pick up speed. I begin to sing. My voice has a high pitch and I don't like that. I sing until I reach the river. It's not easy to maintain singing as you put your feet in cold water. The river sings me a new song, a mellow tune, because it hasn't

rained in a while. Once I've crossed, I climb the mountain with the cows. The higher the better for green grass. I don't know if the cows feel my heart, but inside it I whisper that they must not scatter. That always sucks after school when I have to find them. I have trained them well to stay together when I watch them. I leave them on the mountain top. On my way back down, having short fast legs pays off.

When I get back to the house, I'm glad that it's brighter and I don't have to light my candle. A candle costs fifty cents and I don't have money. I build a fire to cook porridge for my father and me. I heat up water for both our baths. I drink the porridge and wash up quickly. I use water from the local dam for bathing since I have little for drinking. I have a health book I took from the house full of books in the village where white Peace Corps volunteers resided before leaving. I like the book because it helps me discover the best ways to care for my father. As I alphabetize the abandoned books, improving my English, I read the books I find helpful to my survival in the village. In the health book it says boiling things kills germs. I have learned that germs are bad. I don't want my father nor myself to catch them. I boil all the water we use for baths; I don't just heat it up. I also learned that sorghum strengthens the body, which is why I cook porridge for my father and me to drink in the mornings.

I take the water to my father's bed. I don't want to do the job, but I cannot leave my father dirty in blankets all day when I'm at school. I watch my father on the bed, it takes time for me to approach. I turn him over, fixing his pillows. I want to avoid eye contact, but I won't disrespect him. Our eyes lock and my hands tremble. He tries to speak, but only coughs uncontrollably. My teeth clench as I take off his jersey from the mines, but I know his miner clothes keep him warm. His ribs jab against my arm. I move the wash cloth like I'm cleaning an open wound. My father puts his hand against my cheek and I get less shaky. I admire his big

hand that I played with as a child. I only wish this hand would cover my eyes now. I put the clothes away. I think of how I physically care for my creator more than he did for me as a child. It's not right, no boy should do that. Another thought bothers me. The water in my father's bucket for a bath is from a dam which I saw animals pee in. It's dirty. I get angry. I let these kind of thoughts fade, for water gets cold if I get sad and linger. When I finish, I give my father warm porridge. I must leave him for school.

I walk out of the door to St. Peter's School. I would run, but I'm tired from getting water and taking the cows to the mountains. My shoes are getting too small for me and my feet keep growing. On one shoe, my toe is boring a hole. If I run, it hurts more. It's still cold outside. I have one good sweater, but I don't use it on some days because it must last me longer. The grass on the ground is still wet which helps destroy my shoes. My school is at the top of the hill. As I climb the hill, I know I'm going to be a little late. I know pain is awaiting at the gate. Every form of punishment at school involves a lot of pain. Lesotho doesn't believe in detention.

At the school gate, I know Okoro is there to punish the latecomers, in the morning, and after lunch time. I see the reflection of his forehead shining with Vaseline. He is holding a meter-long stick, cut out of a plastic water pipe. He prefers hitting students with it because it doesn't break. Okoro and I are both Africans; I'm Mosotho and he is Nigerian, but we are opposite. This motherfucker is mean!

"Mangoele fats'e! Mangoele fats'e! – Okoro shouts. Knees on the ground! Knees on the ground!"

I lift my school trousers and get on my knees. Okoro makes us crawl on the loose concrete of the path from the gate to the classrooms. My knees burn. As I get to the middle quad

of the school, where we usually stop, I fold back down my school trousers to cover them. I still get mad when I look at the evidence left on my knees, the black spots and scars.

Pulane is waiting for me by the fat tree at the corner of the principal's office.

"Pulane, we have been on our knees at this school more than the Catholic priest at the church who tells us to kneel down as he takes a drink from that fancy cup and eats his white crackers. Man, I swear they call this school Saint Peter's because we must get on our knees every day at the gate."

Pulane appreciates this joke. Seeing her smile makes me forget the bloody scratches on my knees. My first period teacher, Master Sedia, is in class. He doesn't punish me. He is a Mosotho man who cares about his students. His village is far from mine, but he knows I have a sick father and lots of cows. He was a herd boy, too.

"Big man, how were the mountains this morning? "Master Sedia asks. "Poho! E joang ela ea heno, monna?" He is asking me about the mist, grey early in the morning over the Maloti Mountains. He also comments on my big bull with great sharp horns, something that a herd boy is always proud to talk about.

On Mondays before break I have three periods -- all with different teachers.

It's Monday morning and I know Ms. Big Duduza will be walking in next. In her class, shit runs a little gnarly. I remain in my seat as my present teacher, Master Sedia, leaves. I wait for Ms. Big Duduza. I open my window to watch her mirror reflection as she walks to class. Quarter to twelve, quarter past twelve – Ms. Big Duduza's butt cheeks rotate and bounce with every step, like a clock, telling time. She is holding three pieces of chalk, two notebooks, and MR. BIG SHUMBA (her favorite stick). She saunters with her head up, wearing fake goggles

which she believes give her an intelligent appearance. I put my elbow on my desk with the palm of my hand on my forehead, scratching my head. I dream for the lunch hour to come quick, so I can run home to boil my father some eggs.

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Ms. Big Duduza

On those Monday mornings, in Ms. Big Duduza's history class, I always felt un-listened to. I'd ask questions and she would get angry and strike me for saying I was confused about what she was teaching. Somehow, she took it as if I had said her teaching was bogus.

We opened the Basotho history book. I saw the first image, a screaming white Boer hitting a black Mosotho man with barbed wire, pointing his giant white finger as if to show a dog its way out. The Boer was telling the Mosotho man that the land they were standing on, in Lesotho, South Africa, suddenly belonged to him, the Boer. He was directing the Mosotho man out of that land, the Mosotho man who had let his cows graze on that land since he was a child, as long as he has known King Moshoeshoe, the Basotho leader who founded that land. The black man was told to take his cows far away from that land. It could no longer be a part of his inheritance. My teacher stood in front of my desk describing the image, like an old historic tale. Unlike the Mosotho man, the Boer had a name, and she read it from the English version of the history book.

Ms. Big Duduza was my standard four mistress. She loved her name. It meant she had a big Duduza (butt), which represented wealth. She was the widowed daughter of the postman. The postman put all his children through school. They became teachers, one of the only paying jobs a villager could get.

As we read through the history book, Ms. Big Duduza contended that the Basotho land in that 'fascinating' image, as she called it, was ‘well - aroleloane' (which meant “happily shared”). As she spoke, I raised my hand, despite the beating I was risking.

"Ms. Big Duduza, when Mother gives us milk with my friends to eat after a good milking, she does 'aroleloane': happily shares the milk among us kids. We walk away with smiles and full bellies. To me, that’s sharing—happily. What you tell me about the Basotho land and what I gaze upon in this image does not reflect the African word 'arola,' -- to happily share. This to me looks like the Masotho man is devastated at what's happening. And, a barbed wire whipping isn't a swim in the African river on a hot sunny day."

Ms. Big Duduza took off her high heel shoe and hit me with it on my head. My nose began to bleed, so I walked out.

She yelled after me, "You ask questions and undermine my teaching! My teachers taught me this, so now I'm a teacher, dammit!"

With my hand against my bloody nose, I had to throw out one more question. I had already been hit. What was one more blow? Standing at the door with one foot in and one out, ready to dodge if she threw the damn shoe, I asked, "Ms. Big Duduza, who was your teacher?" I ducked out the door. She replied, "Ms. Piti."

I peeked my head, inside again, realizing that for once she wasn’t throwing anything. “And her teacher, Ms. Piti?” I asked.

She responded, "Well, the white lady with spectacles."

I looked at my classmates and put my other foot in the door. "So, Ms.Big Duduza, this Basotho history you're teaching came from a white lady with spectacles, who to me, looks like the giant red skinned man with the barbed wire whip in his hand?"

Ms. Big Duduza stared at me with a confused look. Several students began to whisper. To steady her confidence, Ms. Big Duduza reached for MR. BIG SHUMBA, the oversized stick she used to strike students with. She was proud of this stick, of Africa's finest oak. Very flexible. She would soak it overnight in salty water. She believed the stick inflicted more pain when it was soft and salty. Like everything else in her misguided education, Ms. Big Duduza misunderstood the metaphor of Proverbs 13:24, "Spare the rod, spoil the child." Her version was "Beat the fuck out of the child." She would routinely repeat the proverbs as she paraded through rows of black faces in despair while exercising her arms with heavy swings.

She called me back inside to face MR. BIG SHUMBA. Once seated, I watched her saunter through rows of desks. With her jaw clenched tight, the sleeves of her red and blue snake-skin patterned blouse inflated like balloons, blowing cool air as her arms swung. Her cheekbones grew shiny, revealing the sad African queen whose husband should never have left for the mines to end up dying, leaving her alone and bitter. Guilt tormented me as others, too, were beaten for my questions. She arrived to my desk.

"You get twelve strikes, boy," she announced.