

THE FLIGHT OF THE EAGLET
(Short Story)

by

Seshi Chonco

That summer afternoon was nastily sultry. Ngoya Village in the middle of severe drought seemed lifeless except for an immobile black dot in one mealie patch. The dot turned out to be a young woman in her grandmother's disguise. Her face was, like her tattered pinafore, black and sunburnt.

The hoe steadily rose and fell but she was unable to penetrate the dry soil. For a moment she paused, glimpsed at the golden sun with winking small eyes and then resumed her work. Her eyes avoided looking at the scorched ankle-high mealie stalks. Since the seeds had germinated, not a single drop of rain had been seen in the Ngoya region. She could feel her muscles growing weary. She paused once more, wiped a few big beads of perspiration on her haggard cheek with her pinafore's ragged sleeve, and desperately paid the sun another glance. Soon, very soon, the night would fall on her and her family, swaddling them in its shawl of darkness. Then a few flies gathered on her cracked, pale lips but she made no effort to tease them. She remembered that she had not tasted at least a morsel of food for almost two days. Her stomach began grumbling with hunger but she never quit hoeing for her withered mealies.

Before she could finish the first half of her mealie patch, she heard a dry shrill of piercing voice: "Sis," it cried from a slapdash shanty under a leafless ash tree. "The Baby's Spewing." She knew she had to hurry. The report was urgent. But she found herself confined by hunger and exhaustion to laziness. She could not afford even to walk. When she emerged at the slanting door of her hut, it was even worse.

Her nude child was sprawled on the bare floor while her younger sister who had called her tried to wipe its vomit with a soiled newspaper. She painfully bent, her knees and ankles creaking with stiffness, picked up her gaunt child and supported its bare head on her thin palm.

In its innocent face she could see its father's. Her look at it brought a number of pictures of by-gone days. She recalled that wet chilly day on which they had happened to meet. Her temporary employer had given her a lift to the bus stop. She remembered how she squatted on the roofless garbage compartment with a soap cardboard filled with leftovers her "madam" had given her.

Approaching the bus stop her boss had splashed a gutter full of murky water, drenching the pedestrians nearby. That is how a cruel, tragic assault virtually harmed her soul. Having stopped barely long enough for her to alight, her employer had made a swift U-turn and sped homewards. The annoyed victims of the water-splash had vented their spleens against her after missing him. She could even remember their swear words:

"You moron," had one in an oiled jacket cried, "you toil from sunrise to sunset for this ape. He kicks you, calls every creature in the world, heaven and hell; gives you stale residual crusts which are bulging in your box. He then dumps you on the trailer of his wagon to show that you will always tag after him and his cursed generation till the blessed day of your death . . ." She still could remember more but she tried to omit them from the scroll of her mind. They made a stream of bitter tears gush down her parched cheeks.

The only thing she could remember is that there had been a drunken pacifist who had parleyed for her. The decent neighbor had led her to another bus stop, about half a mile away for the benefit of her own life. It is on their way that they began to know each other. "So you're Nkululeko," he had stammered in a tone of soured man. "Yet do you value the meaning of your name?" For that question he seemed to be needing no answer for he hastened with more words, "Well, call me Zwelethu and I have a sound meaning of my name -- some people just name their children after every creature in the wide world, ha-ha ha." He had tried to smile but finding that she was not in that mood he had wiped his smile and peppered her with a number of awkward questions.

Within three weeks the two people had met twice and thereafter had been bound to one person by the adhesive bonds of love. A few weeks later he had announced his departure to her. He had to go to the deep mines in Transvaal to work for money with which, as he had said, he would marry her. Even though his departure had a pleasant purpose it was a curse to her. She had to be separated from him by numberless hills, hillocks, rivers, rivulets, mountains and valleys.

The only thing she could eagerly do to conquer loneliness was to arm herself with a number of pens, writing pads and envelopes so as to write to him. Her first letter had been fervourably replied. Unfortunately for the following one there had been no response. Yet it was carrying urgent news. It had been passionately reporting that Nkululeko was heavy with his child.

Finding no reply she had confidently written another letter then another and another till there were twenty of them.

From there on she had lost all hope. Her days of pregnancy were tender to her.

Eventually she had given birth to a baby she called Nhlupheko, after her opulence. Finding the task of caring for her poor mite unbearable to her shoulders she had tried to contact his family. To her great misfortune his family had been removed from the site on which they had been squatting. Their roofing-iron shack had been demolished, and the site had been reserved for the extension of a nearby White area.

When the baby gave a giant growl Nkululeko was startled. She seemed to be recovering from an evil dream. She gazed around her and saw an unused lead pencil. That made her think of writing another letter. THE LAST ONE. Gently laying Nhlupheko on a worn straw-mat she struggled to stand up and find anything to write on. Having found an old exercise book thinly covered with a mixture of soot and dust she began working at the letter.

Her handwriting was not legible but that never deterred her. She then read its introduction by heart:

"If you ignore this one too Zwelethu, your only child will die. The same as the one you once loved, for suicide will be a sound cure to her."

Even though she was diffident she posted the letter.

One day, to her great surprise she opened the door of her hut to one who introduced himself as her child's father. He was lean, stout and pale as if he had stayed indoors all his life. His fidgeting eyes searched for something to sit on and she motioned him on a sweat stained creaking chair.

He greeted her in a low tone, and for quite a few minutes he was silent as if his lips had never moved. His cheeks were thin and seemed to be adhered to his jawbone. His blood shot eyes stared at the half naked child he was said to have begot. He could not tell whether it was a boy or a girl. He stretched his arm, extending a forefinger for Nhlupheko to grasp. The poor baby's tiny fingers curled around it. Zwelethu tried to hoist his child up but when its head was about a knee high it lost its grip, fell with a dull thud and stared at him amazed. He expected it to growl but instead it whispered in a strange rhythmic sound.

Finding that he was not determined to speak she shot him with questions: "Why after all have we been ditched? What have we done? We received no money not at least plain greetings to make us keep you in memory. Feel at home Zwelethu and tell

your loved one the whole story."

Having said this she leaned against the wall with her back and examined her fingernails. "Too sorrowful, it is a long story," said he, his dry lips moving as if in an excruciating pain, trying not to collide with each other. For another time there was utter silence in the room.

She presumed that he was hungry and hurried to the kitchen to prepare him a cold boiled cabbage and a few spoonfuls of mealie-pap. He could hardly swallow his meal but after a long struggle to adapt himself to it he succeeded. She then brought him a weak Mahewu and gave Nhlupheko a 9 week solution of skimmed milk dissolved in water.

After such a meal he seemed to become a bit animated. His lips moved with a better motion than at first, revealing a team of his tobacco stained teeth.

"In fact," he said rather apologetically, "I never worked much. After a month of my arrival there I observed that my poor compatriots were exploited. You know, I was, as I said to you, there to gather money so that we could marry. If the money was insufficient, our life would be insufficient too. So, for that reason, I led a revolting faction. A few buildings of our compounds were gutted down to ashes. The only thing they could do for me was to imprison me for the whole year. But I will do something to revenge my wanton arrest."

She inwardly scuffled to make him abstain the vengeance which was printed in his cruel eyes. She decided to digress from conversation at hand. "Life has been tough for me," she cried, her eyes still pinned on her hands, "I am earning a tender living in financial straits. Our child is badly ill and grows thin every day. I cannot afford milk, bread and mealie meal, for the price of these has just soared."

Running out of words, she stopped talking, glimpsed at Nhlupheko who had finished the watery ration, the poor mite's daily meal. She remembered that for five days she would strive hard for she would not get that skimmed milk powder. Her mother who used to pilfer it from her madam's kitchen was severely ill too, and could not go to work.

"Mmh!" roared he dryly, trying to clear his throat. Startled, Nkululeko stealthily glanced at his slightly moving lips. "This means that I was stored in that concrete den for no good reason while my child died here. Now I'll do something about this, something must be done." "Do what?" she asked in a sneering discouraging tone, "please Zwelethu stay calm. Drive the fiend out of your brains and be yourself. I guess what you

plan is brutal and will land you in hot water. They hang criminals these days."

"What!" exclaimed he furiously, "Criminals, criminals! Am I a criminal when I revenge for the torture of my own child, my own blood? Remember, Nkululeko, remember that I went there to work, to get money and bring it home so that the three of us would live. And when they openly robbed me of my dues in broad daylight I had to spit my venom on their eyes. Had not I. No I am no coward and I am a descendant of vengeful brave people. Something vengeful must be done!"

He emphasized, banging the weak table. The metal plate at the far end of the table on which his food had been brought fell with a maddening tingling.

He swiftly stood up, groped on his pockets. Thinking that he was fishing for a weapon she buried her head on her cupped hands and bent forward to rest it on her jutting knees. She waited for a stabbing pain to start attacking her body. There was another bang at the table and the infuriated man was hastily gone in an eye's wink.

Yet he had said something before he went, she knew. She rose, craned her neck and searched for him in the whole hut. She scurried to the door which was left ajar and peeped on its crack. She could see him waddling in the distance. She searched the corridors of her mind for the words he had said just before his departure. The only words that boldly came to her memory were: "Have this!", then a bang at the table, "This is the only money with which I am left. My child must live. Yet I am going to do something pronto. I am going to do something, something, someth....." And the falling walls of her hut had echoed his words.

She remembered that he had left some money. She searched for it and found a twenty rand note lying on the table. The only money with which he had been left, and his child must live.

The following day she sent her child to a doctor who said Nhlupheko had got kwashiorkor. He gave Nkululeko a few bottles of medicine, a free sample of powdery baby food and from his own lunch box a big orange. She was thankful and respectfully bowed as she left the clinic.

On the way home she peeled the fruit for her hungry child. Nhlupheko did not want to be fed but to lay her hands on her food, so she let the baby feed itself. The fruit, being strange to Nhlupheko, was hurled down the red caverns of the tiny mouth and accidentally blocked the tiny throat. The baby choked and choked until blood was streaming down the tiny nos-

trils. She had to send her back to the doctor at once.

Since Zwelethu had returned from Nkululeko's home he was not himself. He had begun making wild gesticulations, like a madman and had ignored his meals. At his new job in the colliery he had made a number of blunders.

One day he received a letter from his loved one. He could guess its contents: just a mere note of thanks for the money, and nothing else. At lunch time he secluded himself to read it. The writing pad was flowered with big drops of dry tears. He cognitatively stared at it and let it fall from his trembling fingers. He felt the world around him undergoing a sudden twirl. A peculiar hit from nowhere irritated his senses. His knees went limp and knocked each other. His body fell with a dull thud over a heap of sunburnt coals. For some time he was sprawled there like a dead hen.

The next day Zwelethu found his way to Nkululeko's home. Before entering he paused, produced a soiled letter from his pocket and read the words written in bold: "NHLUPHEKO HAS JUST PASSED AWAY!" A catalogue of ceaseless thoughts jarred his mind. He gazed at the dry ash tree where he had seen an eagle on his first visit. The next was gone.

He slowly entered as Nkululeko opened the door for him; the door creaked on its uncoiled hinges. Before he could enter, his eyes were attracted by something eccentric in the garden. A hillock of huddled stones on whose pinnacle was pronged crossed staves which seemed to be made of dry mealie stalks. He could not tell how he approached it but the only thing he could remember was his massive prayer. A PRAYER FOR POWER TO AVENGE.

When he eventually rose, he noticed that Nkululeko had taken the opposite position. The bereaved parents remained mute, flanking their mite's poor grave. On her tear-blurred eyes he could see the images of his enemies. He slowly turned, gazed at the bare Ngoya mountains behind which lay a thousand mountains shielding Transvaal and the deep mines.

When he turned to look at her eyes again the images of his child's torturers were even enlarged and bold. He remembered that she had called him a criminal when he swore to retaliate. Seeing how his face changed to a dozen different kinds of pallor she became frightened. Vengeance and cruelty were still printed on his brow whose frown was like the waves of a raging sea.

Suddenly he trudged towards the gate, his eyes pinned on the cracked earth. He remembered how he had nearly witnessed his child guzzling a live cockroach. The lucky insect had

escaped through Nhlupheko's weak fingers and for its life toward a big dark, dark hole in one wall of the hut.

Nkululeko in her ebony mourning shawl stood stock still, like Lot's wife who was converted to a salt pillar. She saw the mixture of dust, fog, mist and smoke from the chimneys of Ngoya-houses swallow him. The clouds darkened over him and there was a vile tempest.

The only thing that she knew was he was gone. To do something? She asked herself a single question: "Will he return?"