

Brecht De Poortere

Fiction

THE GHOST OF A SNAKE

The cotton fields stretched so far that, where they met the horizon, the clouds looked like they had risen from the earth. When I squinted, I imagined a snowy landscape back home. But this was Cibitoke, in the heart of Africa, on the border between Burundi and the Congo, then known as Zaire.

I sat in the back of the Peugeot pickup and held on tight as we bumped our way on the dirt road that cut through this calm white sea. The plants swayed in the breeze, sending ripples across the land. A trail of red dust rose behind us and settled on the crops, waiting to be washed away during the rainy season.

We pulled into remote farms and cooperatives that Dad had helped to set up with Belgian aid. He inspected the premises and checked the equipment. People asked him questions in *Kirundi*. He answered in French. I usually followed him everywhere, looking as if I understood.

But this was the end of the day and I was tired. I stayed in the back of the truck and played with the fluffy bolls of cotton, slowly stretching out the fibers so they looked like a piece of white chewing gum.

A small boy my age approached and held something out to me. At first, I couldn't quite see what it was but then I jumped and scrambled back. Dad heard me scream and came running to the truck. When he noticed the thing the child held in his hands, he laughed. "Paul, it's just a skin shed by a snake—it's not alive! Take it, he's giving it to you."

I reached out and tentatively accepted the gift. It felt so thin and light I worried it would blow away in the wind. I could see straight through it, yet all the snake's features—the scales, the spots, even the eyes and mouth—were beautifully preserved. It looked like the ghost of a snake and I smiled at the boy. "*Urakoze*," I thanked him.

“You see,” Dad said, “the snake has lost its skin, but it’s alive somewhere. It has a new skin now. But it’s still the same snake.”

Evening fell and we headed back home. The gravel in the driveway crunched under the weight of the car and, when Dad switched off the motor, a chorus of crickets enveloped us.

While Mom cooked dinner, I joined our night guard Abel around the fire he had lit. We sat in silence and played a game of *Ikibuguzo*. As we moved the seeds around the pits, we listened to the hissing wood and crackling flames. I won and Abel announced, “Monsieur Paul, you will be king one day!” Above us, the firmament lit up with a thousand stars

That was the last night of my childhood in Cibitoke.

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The following morning, Mom and Dad told me we had to go back to Europe, immediately.

“But why?” I asked.

They glanced at each other. Then Dad crouched next to me and explained, “Some evil things are happening, Paul, and it’s better if we go away for a while.”

“What evil things?”

Dad put his hand on my cheek and looked me straight in the eye. “Sometimes, people get angry with each other, and then they do nasty things. It’s best not to be around when that happens.”

“And Abel? Is he coming too?”

“No, Paul. I’m afraid Abel can’t come.”

“But won’t they do nasty things to him?”

Dad didn’t say anything for a while and Mom crouched down as well. She smiled in a sad kind of way and put her arm around me. “Don’t you worry about Abel, Paul. No one has any reason to be angry with him. He’ll be alright.”

We headed off that same afternoon — three hastily packed suitcases thrown in the back of the truck. In our rush, we

didn't have a chance to say goodbye to Abel. We left some money and a note, asking him to take care of the house while we were away.

Before joining the main road towards Bujumbura, we made a detour to Christian's house. Christian was the only other European in Cibitoke and a good friend of my parents. He was what they called an "*ancien*" — an ex-pat who had been in Burundi for longer than anyone could remember and who seemed to know everything about the country, its history, and customs. Mom and Dad played cards and drank beers with him on Sunday afternoons.

Our car entered the driveway and Christian's dogs escorted us to the house, jumping and barking excitedly. The sun was setting on the English cottage garden, saturating it with color. The perfect lawn and carefully designed flowerbeds looked completely out of place. Christian had tried to graft a memory from home onto the African bush.

We got out of the car and stepped onto the veranda, where we found ourselves immersed in a mini tropical forest. Ferns, orchids, and palms were scattered chaotically in earthenware pots on the ground and woven baskets hanging from the ceiling. Hidden in the thick foliage, there were wooden sculptures with elongated bodies, oval-faced masks with pointy chins, and coffee bean eyes. In the corner, a few parrots squawked in a dirty birdcage.

The lights were off inside the house and my eyes took a while to adjust to the darkness. Then, gradually, the zebra skin on the red cement floor came into focus — its legs spread wide and its head pointing towards the door, as if it were expecting us. A python skin hung on the wall, flanked on each side by *Intore* shields and spears.

At the back of the room, sitting on a sculpted mahogany bench, loomed Christian's formidable frame. He wore his usual skintight shorts and a blue batik shirt with several buttons undone, revealing a carpet of white chest hair. He held a bottle of Primus beer in his hand and, on a straw mat next to him, sat Estelle — his Burundian wife.

“Jean, Mathilde, how kind of you to drop by!” Christian bellowed and, with a generous sweep of his arm, invited my parents to sit down.

“We don’t have much time,” Dad warned. “It’s already getting dark . . .”

Christian ignored him. “Bernice,” he called his maid, “*Zimana abashitwi*.” And then he smiled at me and winked.

“Christian,” Dad insisted, “you know King Ntare has been killed? The situation is escalating quickly. Apparently, there is a Hutu uprising in the South.”

The maid came in and placed bottles of bright-colored soft drinks on the table, a couple of large brown Primus, along with samosas and oily, salty peanuts. I craved them, but Dad was still standing and Mom stared nervously at her watch. I knew I wasn’t to touch any of it.

“Jean,” Christian said, “it’s only a local reckoning. It will blow over, like in ’69.” He bit into a samosa and some batter stuck in his large, white beard. “Mmm, Bernice, these are some of the best samosas you’ve ever made!” he shouted in the direction of the kitchen. Then he gobbled up the rest of the pastry and licked the grease off his fingers.

“We’re on our way to Bujumbura,” Dad continued. “We received a phone call last night. The embassy is advising all Belgians to leave. Please come with us, before it’s too late.”

Christian did not respond. He noticed I was staring at the python skin on the wall. “You like that skin, eh, son? Well, that’s a real snake. I killed and skinned it myself—fought it with my bare hands!”

I knew that, of course. Christian told me the story each time we visited. But I was still impressed. Everything about Christian impressed me. At the back of his house, there was a cage with a live python. I didn’t dare ask to see it now, but Christian loved entertaining us by introducing a guinea pig into the cage. The little rodent would freeze with fear. It could have tried to run away, but it didn’t. Instead, it just sat in a corner, hypnotized by the snake, waiting to be devoured.

“Christian, please, this isn’t a joke. Just come with us — you can always return later when things have quietened down.”

Christian had been avoiding eye contact with Dad, but now he looked straight at him. And then he spoke softly and slowly as if to spell out the obvious to someone who wasn’t very bright. “Jean, I have nothing to run from. And, perhaps more importantly, I have nothing to run to. This is where I belong. Stop worrying about me. *Que sera sera!*”

Dad was about to reply, but then his shoulders dropped and he let out a deep sigh. Christian took a sip of beer and winked at me again, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Meanwhile, Estelle was looking at the ground. I had never seen an adult cry, but I was pretty sure there was a tear running down her cheek.

“Okay,” Dad said finally. “Suit yourself, Christian.” And we said our goodbyes.

Christian accompanied us outside, joking and laughing all the way. He rubbed his fingers through my hair. “Son, you take care of yourself, okay?” As we drove off, I kept looking at him through the back window of the truck. He waved wildly and blew kisses until we disappeared around the corner.

We arrived in Bujumbura that same night, after a three-hour car journey over dirt roads, part of which we did in the dark. There were several roadblocks armed by Tutsi soldiers. Machine guns in hand, they circled the car and pressed their torch-lit faces against the windows, which they asked us to wind down. They pushed their heads into the car — their eyes were bloodshot and their breaths smelled putridly sweet. Dad slipped them some money and they let us through.

In Bujumbura, we stayed with our friends, Eric and Nadine, for a couple of nights. Dad spent a lot of time on the phone trying to get us onto a plane and out of the country. When we finally got tickets, we hurried to the airport. The streets were filled with soldiers. At one point, Mom grabbed me and turned my head away from the window — but I had

already seen the bodies lying by the side of the road. There was chaos at the airport, with people shouting and pushing. Even when we got on to the plane, we waited for hours as passengers joined at the last minute and luggage was endlessly rearranged to fit into the overhead compartments

When the plane finally took off, it felt like the country, my childhood, was slowly being ripped out of me. I watched the corrugated iron roofs, the dirt roads, and banana trees get smaller and smaller until we pierced through the clouds and the sky turned into a giant cotton field reddened by the setting sun. Gutted and empty, I rested my head against the cold windowpane and Mom slipped her hand into mine.

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I never adapted to life in Europe. From the first day, I single-mindedly pursued just one objective: to return to Burundi as soon as I could. It took me eighteen years. In 1990, armed with a degree in agronomy, I finally stepped on African soil again and started a job at the United Nations World Food Programme.

At the first opportunity, I hired a car and drove to Cibitoke. The roads were tarmacked now and the trip only took about an hour. Apart from that, everything still looked and felt the same: the rusty Coca-Cola signs on the kiosks along the way, the smell of corn roasting on charcoal fires, children chasing the car shouting *Umuzungu, Umuzungu!*—a word used to refer to White people, but which means “he who roams about.”

It didn't take long to find the house where I grew up. Although many of the cotton cooperatives had been abandoned, people still remembered Dad and the work he had done. He had become a bit of a legend—even kids too young to have met him knew his name. A few jumped into the back of the car and guided me. As I pulled into the driveway, the crackling of the gravel made me feel six years old again.

The illusion didn't last long. The house was just a shell now, stripped of anything that might be remotely useful—taps, sockets, windows, doors—it had all found a new life somewhere else. Only the walls were left and I projected memories onto them, trying to imagine the place the way it used to be. As I walked through the remnants of my childhood, I suddenly heard a voice behind me: “Monsieur Paul?”

I turned around and, yes, he had aged. He had gained some weight and his hair had receded. But the person standing in front of me was unmistakably Abel. We fell into each other's arms and then he held onto my hand while he explained how happy he was to see me, apologized about the house, and urged me to come and meet his wife and children. Even when I had accepted the invitation, he was still holding on to my hand.

At his house, he brought out plastic chairs and placed them under a mango tree. In the shadows of the front door, I spotted his kids—too shy to come and greet me. Even in 1990, few Umuzungus made it to Cibitoke. But Abel forced them to introduce themselves, all six of them, and gradually their curiosity eclipsed their bashfulness. Some gathered around me, ran their fingers through my smooth, European hair, and then ran away, giggling like it was the funniest thing they had ever seen.

We ate rice with beans and cassava, and even some goat, which had been slaughtered for the occasion. As evening fell, a terra cotta pot was brought out which contained Impeke—a beer made from sorghum. I knew this was only meant for special events. We plunged our straws into the brownish-pink liquid and drank to mark our reunion. Then Abel got up and went into the house.

“No way!” I laughed when he re-emerged a few minutes later.

“Why?” he grinned, holding his Ikibuguzo board. “Are you afraid you may no longer be king?”

We placed the seeds in the holes and started sowing them around our territories. I was a little rusty, but we had a good, long game. At one point, it even looked like I might win. But then I got stuck and Abel declared victory.

“Ha, Monsieur Paul, you really have lost it!” he snickered and slapped his knee. When he was all laughed out, he proceeded to light a fire, as of old. We drank more *Impeke* and I was feeling a little tipsy. We watched the flames in silence for a while, both enjoying the sensation of going back in time. But, at some point, I had to ask.

“Abel, what happened to Christian?”

He stared at the fire without saying a word. Then he stood up, fetched some more logs, and threw them on, one by one. With each thud, the flames flared up throwing sparks into the night. The heat burned my skin and, through the smoke, I probed Abel’s expressionless face. He sat down with a sigh.

“I still don’t know if Monsieur Christian was very brave, or just stupid,” he said, poking the fire with a stick as if looking for answers to his question. “You know he was a teacher at the technical school?” I did know that. “The Tutsi soldiers came. They were looking for Hutu teachers and students.” I knew that too. The Tutsi minority were terrified that the Hutu would take over, so they wiped out the entire Hutu elite.

“Monsieur Christian heard about the soldiers,” Abel continued. “He tried to save some students—five of them. He hid them in a closet in his house. But the soldiers suspected something. They came to his place and searched everywhere. They found the students and killed them all—with a bullet through the head.”

I closed my eyes, trying to fend off the images conjured, but that only made it worse. “Christian and his wife as well?” I asked.

“No,” said Abel. He paused for a long time and stared into the darkness that had descended upon us, black and opaque. The clicking of cicadas and the croaking of frogs

had grown into a crescendo and, somewhere in the thicket, a dog howled. “They raped Madame. In front of Monsieur Christian. And then they shot her too.”

I pictured Estelle the way I last saw her, sitting on that mat with a tear running down her cheek. I felt a lump in my throat, but I knew worse was to come. After a few moments, I gathered up the courage. “And Christian?”

Abel too was struggling now and his voice was shaking. “They punished him. A bullet would have been too lenient. Instead, they took a machete and sliced his stomach open like this,” and with a finger, Abel traced an invisible line from right under his heart straight down to his abdomen. “But they didn’t kill him. They just left him like that.” Abel paused and swallowed. “We found him a few days later when the situation had calmed down. There was a long trail of gut and blood on the floor, all the way from the bedroom to the veranda, where he died. We buried him in the garden, together with Madame.”

While Abel had been talking, a layer of white ash had spread over the logs, slowly strangling the wood and starving it of oxygen. The flames, breathless, had retreated into a weary red glow and the fire, occasionally still twitching, was fighting for survival. The heat had slipped away, the darkness crept over us and Abel saw me shiver. He poked the fire with his stick, trying to revive it. Smoke rose from the embers, curling upwards in light, ghost-like twirls, and then dissolved into the night as if it had never been.