

The Big Chiefs

Meja Mwangi

They were assembled in a large hut, next to a crumbling, schoolhouse to which no children came any more, all of them hard and ruthless men who had seen woeful days and never forgotten about them. They were all former *formers* and united by having been formerly something that they could no longer be. They were labourers and lawyers, doctors and drivers, mechanics and muggers, students and smugglers and men from all walks of a former life; people condemned to the Pit for any number of reasons including their ethnic heritage and their political thought, or simply for being on the wrong side of the fence when the call was sounded and the gates slammed shut; for reasons none of which mattered now.

Some of them had taken part in the creation of the laws that now classed them less than human. Others had built the fortifications and the barricades that now kept them out of the City. Still others had enforced the evacuation and ostracised their kin before they too were kicked out of the City. They were indignant and intractable men, outraged men with a massive axe to grind, men who would do anything to be let back in human society. And they were united in their fear and loathing of the system which had so publicly rejected and humiliated them.

The Boy, however, knew them for what they were - men so desperate to get out of hell that they would sign another pact with the Devil. Men who argued too much about what they could do, what they should do and what was necessary to do. Though they spoke the same language, their meetings were always a cacophony of ideas, ideologies, purposes and egos. Among them was a new face, a man with a bandage on his head, and a pained expression on his face.

They stopped arguing, when the Boy entered the meeting place, and turned on him like a pack that had found a new prey.

"You are late," one of them said.

"Where have you been?" asked another.

"How can you keep us waiting?"

"You are always late," said another. "Where did you go?"

The Boy, feeling the air of cold desperation that permeated the room, said, "I missed the house."

"This house?" exclaimed the Lawyer. "You missed this house?"

"I was angry," said the Boy, "I didn't look where I was going."

"Have you been listening to that old fool again?" the Smuggler asked him.

Irrational anger surged through the Boy's heart. He fought to control it as he stood by the doorway looking round the room at the men gathered there. They sat on the floor and on wooden crates, on upturned buckets and on the two unmade beds and on anything that could be sat on. They leaned on the sooty walls, making them sag outwards. They were not only angry but also tired of waiting. They were tired of waiting for the Boy, weary of waiting for something to happen to end to their perpetual limbo. And they were tired, as the Smuggler often said, of living in the Devil's anus. But they could not reach the Devil so they blamed it on each other and the Boy.

"The Old Man is not a fool," he said.

"Not a fool?" the man demanded. "What is he doing here?"

"The same thing you are," said the Boy.

"He was inside when it happened," the Smuggler vented. "He was right in the thick of things, and what did he do? He stepped back like a fool, opted out of it all and walked away while the rest built palaces and castles on the hilltops. He could have made himself a fortune, been a *bona fide* citizen in the City, but what did that old fool do? He became a poet, a self-appointed hero of the masses and, of all things, a Pit crier, a singer of dreadful dirges wasting his breath on any fool that will listen."

He had many hateful things to say about the Old Man, and he said them with great resentment, desperation and despair. The Boy remained calm, and heard him out, for he too knew that it was true. The Old Man had been a chief too, with money and power and status. He had been there when they changed the constitution, in an underhanded manner, to allow themselves to rule forever and ever and ever, and he had been there too when the master-plan was drawn up, when the death militia were formed in every village and commune in readiness for the massacres to come. Everyone knew that the Old Man had been summoned by the plotters to join the interim Government that would later initiate and supervise the killings of hundreds of thousands of people. It was even rumoured that he had been

offered the vacant presidency as inducement but had turned it down and consequently sealed his own fate. He could have blown the whistle on the plotters and been damned for all time. But, for whatever reason, he had not done so; though he claimed to have written numerous reports to human rights watch and to other organisations and concerned peoples, warning them of the imminence of a massive bloodshed. He had no proof of any of it though, for his old life had been razed down along with his house. Now people vilified him, or praised him, as convenience and memory served them, and there was nothing he could do about it. Still, some were gracious enough to remind others that he could have kept quiet and continued to eat and grow fat, and to prosper among the chiefs and the thieves, and the foreign wolves that would eventually eat up the whole country. He had chosen, instead, to speak and become a pariah among his fellow chiefs, a man marked for banishment, and worse, long before the Pit was conceived.

“And you tell me he’s not a fool,” said the former economist to the Boy.

He was bald and had eyes that discharged hate like puss from an infected soul. His indignation, as all present knew, stemmed from his resentment at having been locked out of the system that had enriched his peers beyond human imagination. And all because he was different.

He had been a chief economist at the Ministry of Finance, the man in charge of the Government coffers and a facilitator of that corruption. He it was who had invented some of the most diabolical schemes to clean out the Government treasury. He it was who had devised, implemented and presided over the worst theft of Government funds in human history. At a time when the national economy was in tatters, the central bank on its knees and the population languishing in poverty, he and the Big Chiefs, their friends and relatives had conspired with international thieves, for the Government to pay out millions of dollars as export compensation to non-existent exporters of non-existent gold from a country that did not have any gold worth mining. Everyone had got away with it, except himself. Designated sacrificial lamb long before he got promoted to the job, he had been unceremoniously dumped by his chiefs the moment the World Bank asked why. It hurt him especially hard when, instead of being publicly honoured, as other master thieves before him had been honoured, he was publicly vilified and consigned to the Pit like a common criminal, along with the hoards he had helped impoverish. And all because he was different.

He who had never harboured any ethnic, racial or sexist sentiments, and would have stolen with anyone regardless of their origin, had been one of the first casualties of ethnic paranoia. It drove him mad to think that he had eaten, drunk and partied with people he considered his friends, but who were meanwhile plotting to kill him and all his family and friends. Secure in his false belief that a civilised, educated and democratically elected leadership did not turn against the electorate and aid and abet mass murder, the former economist had hobnobbed with some of the worst mass murderers of all time and never even had a clue. He did not, and had never, cared for anyone but himself. He did not and had never cared for anyone in the Pit. He tolerated them as long as they kept to themselves and kept their scabbed brood and their dogs out of his way. No one liked him, and he liked no one. They tolerated him because he was a man of means and commanded the gangs of smugglers that fed and clothed the Pit.

“There,” the former economist-turned-smuggler spat at the Boy’s feet. “I spit on your Old Man.”

The Boy, disregarding the provocation, said to him, “You were there too when the Old Man was there. What did you do for yourself or for anyone else?”

The Smuggler shot to his feet.

“One more word out of you and I’ll ...”

“Kill me?” asked the Boy. “Is that all you know to do now, kill anyone who stands in your way?”

The former student stepped between them and said, “We have better fights to fight today.”

The Student and the Smuggler faced each other. The Smuggler was known for violence, and for his proficiency with the machete he carried strapped to his waist. He was bigger than the Student, but the Student was known for his courage. In his university days, he had led every vicious confrontation between the police and student protesters and was targeted for assassination long before the genocide started. He had a long, scar across his face, where a genocider had slashed him when he led resistance in the hills. Stories were told of his valour and his resourcefulness, and of how he had wrestled the machete from his would-be-killer and decapitated him with it; of how he had downed dozens more murderers with the same weapon, while blood flowed like a river down his neck. Then, it was said, he had taken a gun from the Colonel who had come out to help the militia and scattered the gang of killers

with it. He would have killed the whole lot of them had he not collapsed and nearly died from loss of blood.

"I have no quarrel with you," the Smuggler said to him. "But where I came from we did not let boys talk back at men."

"And see what happened where you came from," the Student said.

The former teacher and the former farmer rose wearily from their places and stepped between them.

"Gentlemen," said the Teacher. "Let's behave like civilised men now."

Gaining their courage from his, the rest of the men stirred and began to speak up.

"Peace," said the former mechanic. "We must keep the engine running; let us keep the peace."

"Peace," said the formers.

"Peace," they said.

"There's nothing to be gained from shedding our own blood," said the man with the bandage on his head.

"Nothing at all," said the formers.

"We have enough enemy to do that for us," he said.

"Enough enemy," they agreed.

The Smuggler and the Student glared at each other. Only the old Teacher, standing like a rock between them, kept them from tearing each other apart. The Teacher, who, it was well known, had braved many machete-wielding militias in the hills and survived, albeit with too many scars to count, looked on the Smuggler's machete with apprehension. The last, the deepest and the cruellest, machete blow he had received during the entire ninety days of madness and of facing up to bloodthirsty murderers from dawn to dusk, had been delivered by a student, his own student, an ace student he had shepherded through algebra and dyslexia and a lad who had grown to be like a son to him. A sane and intelligent student who had wept bitterly as he chopped at his Teacher with a blunt machete while the militia, the headmaster and fellow teachers urged him on. Now, as he faced off with another Student and the Smuggler, the Teacher had nothing but pity for anyone who had committed genocide for fear of being murdered himself.

Mercifully, the Smuggler returned to his place on the bed and the Student went back to leaning against the wall.

"Come inside," said the Teacher to the Boy.

The Boy finally entered and sat on the floor near where the Student stood.

"Gentlemen," said the Teacher. "Now that we are all here, we may begin our meeting."

And so they began.

They talked about this and talked about that. They talked about everything and nothing for a while. Then the Student called the meeting to order, remarked that they were wasting time and asked the Lawyer to give them direction. The Lawyer was the self-appointed secretary to the group. He read out the minutes of their last meeting, a long and winded document he had worked on through the night to ward off nightmares, and which bore some semblance to the facts of their earlier discussion.

Since landing in the Pit, and discovering that hell was real and that the Devil was real too and lived among men, and that death happened to everyone regardless, he had decided to make his life count. He did so by finding the best in everyone, in everything and in every situation, and exaggerating whatever he found until all else seemed insignificant. He did not get many opportunities to practise his craft in the Pit, apart from settling the occasional quarrels between neighbours, but he utilised the few that he got to the extreme and, in the end, antagonised everyone by defending the indefensible. Now, when it seemed he would go on talking in his lofty manner forever, the former farmer halted him saying, irritably, "We all know what we agreed last time, so let's just see if we still agree."

The Lawyer stopped startled. He was unhappy to see everyone nodding in agreement.

"Gentlemen," he said to them. "The question before us is quite simple. Do we or do we not commit to the task at hand?"

"We do," they answered.

"Gentlemen," he said. "In that case, I move that we ..."

"Stop the jargon and get to the point," said the Student, he who had been expelled from the university for dissent. "We are schemers and plotters. Forget the nice language and let's get on with the conspiracy."

He did not say it with anger or resentment, but he said it with an unsettling severity that made the Lawyer stumble on his words. No one belonged in the Pit, but the Lawyer, of all the Pit residents was the most misplaced. He had been once a big man in the service of the Big Chiefs, bending and sometimes breaking the laws to benefit them. He had done so well they had named him the Chief Justice, the Attorney General and Controller of Elections; a triple crown of position, power and wealth, and all that went with them. He had wallowed in it with the abandon and the haughtiness that went with knowing he *belonged*. He had beat upon his chest and declared, with unequalled arrogance:

*I am a rich man
Surrounded by rich men
Men like me who have it all
I have nothing to fear at all
Not from the rabble
May you rot in hell.*

That was in the old days, the days before the Pit. Long before the divide between good and bad, between *us* and *them*, and between life and death was so savagely redefined and brutally curved out with machetes. The Lawyer was *tall* by definition and had lived in a mansion in the hills as befitted his office. He had driven the biggest cars of the day and eaten and drunk with the most high of the Big Chiefs; paving his way by humouring their excesses with subservience, flattery and lies and, when the need arose, some underhanded justice. He had bent the law beyond breaking to cover up for their dirty dealings and defended them against accusations of nepotism, corruption, moral degeneracy and racial bigotry. In the process he had managed to convince himself and the whole world that the days of ethnic barbarism were over, that no regime would ever again try to wipe out a whole people. He it was who had led, and given legitimacy, to the gang of hand-picked, politically correct constitutional lawyers who had changed the constitution to keep despots in power for eternity and condemn millions of their countrymen to historical limbo. He had feasted in the decayed lavender and hot roses courtyard, rubbed shoulders with the ruthlessly powerful, and wallowed in money and influence. He had even begun to believe, like many intellectuals of his ilk, that all people were indeed equal and happy, that there was no ethnic animosity, overt or covert, in the land, and that anyone, anyone at all, could safely dream of running the country as it should have been ran.

Then he had gone home and forgotten his own devious laws, the laws of the jungle that decreed the ends justified the means, that the only truly heinous crime on the face of the earth was to be poor, and had gone and challenged a bigger Big Chief for his seat in Parliament. Come campaign time, he had got drunk on his own arrogance and declared that the presidency was vacant, because the old man who sat on it was illiterate and corrupt, knew nothing of law and counted his worth in goats. Then, all of a sudden, his well had suddenly dried up. His lenders had recalled their generous loans, his credit was cancelled and all his cars and houses repossessed and dished out to more appreciative civil servants. Then he had lost his job to a menial, his wife to the illiterate old man who counted his worth in goats, and he had been dispatched to spend the rest of his life in historical limbo among the poor he had scorned and who had nothing but sympathy for him and his kind.

“Gentlemen,” he said loftily, to the conspirators. “We all know why we are here today.”

Everyone present knew why he was there. The Lawyer was there because he hoped that the impossible schemes, and pathetic plots they hatched up regularly, might one day be blessed with success, that they would reach critical mass and initiate a big enough movement to topple the regime that had spurned him and facilitate a return to some kind of humane Government. He was there because he needed to regain what he had lost through his oversight, and he craved to get back into the City, to reopen his private practice and start eating again.

“God help anyone who doesn’t know why he is here,” the Student said impatiently. “Did you get the papers?”

He was looking at the Smuggler. Still smarting from their encounter, the Smuggler indicated under the bed.

“Get them out,” said the Student.

The men rose to pull two cartons from under the bed.

“Did you get boys?” he asked the Boy.

“One, maybe two, thousand,” said the Boy.

There was a hush in the room. Those in the process of extracting the cartons stopped and turned to the Boy with a mixture of awe and doubt.

“Two thousand boys?” asked the Lawyer doubtfully.

He had read a secret Government document stating that the population of the Pit was two thousand, mostly criminal men, and he was prone to believing official propaganda.

“Impossible,” he said.

The Student turned to the Boy. The Boy admitted that he had not counted the boys, but he had talked to some boys, who had talked to other boys, and they had assured him that the boys were just as fed up with poverty and unemployment, and all the injustices in the country, and that they too wanted change.

“Do they know the danger to which they expose themselves?” the Student asked him.

“They know,” said the Boy.

“Did you tell them they will be shot at?”

“They know,” said the Boy.

“Did you tell them they may be injured or killed?” asked the Doctor.

“They know,” said the Boy.

The boys knew exactly where they stood, - between hell and death. They were heirs to a tradition of violence and genocide; nearly every one of them carried deep physical and psychological scars inflicted on them by a regime that was not fit to run an abattoir.

There was silence. They thought about the boys who had volunteered to face brutality armed with ideas and words. It was the former mechanic who spoke next.

“Let’s see the posters,” he said.

The cartons were opened and their contents examined. The Student took a poster and spread it for all to see.

“Poor people are people too,” he read. “We demand justice NOW!”

The posters would be pasted onto every telephone and electricity pole, on every door and shop window, every blank wall and bare tree, and onto every car and house. Accompanying the posters were brightly coloured leaflets that would be spread over the City like a carpet of thorns for the City people to tread on. Their message was just as simple and precise. The Pit people were tired of living a subhuman existence in the City dump. They wanted recognition and reintegration in society. They wanted justice, equality and freedom. Unless these rights were granted to them, they would march into the City and destroy the walls that kept them out.

The men listened to the Student read and painstakingly explain the meaning of each statement on every pamphlet.

“Hear this, you evil doers,” he read aloud. “Hear this and hear it well, people of Sodom.”

“Sodom?” asked the former economist.

“Silence,” said the former farmer.

“We are not after your thrones or you crowns,” read the Student. “We are not after your wealth or your wives. We only ask to be allowed to live like people in our country, to live in freedom as people should. Why do you fear us so much that you build prison walls to keep us out? We do not hate you as you hate us. But do hear us and hear us well - we are not afraid of you any more. We know what evil you are capable of, but this time we shall not let you succeed.”

They stared at the Student stunned.

“Who wrote it?” asked the Labourer shaking his head in awe.

They turned to the Boy, whose responsibility it had been to compose the leaflets and posters.

“What have you got against it?” he asked them.

“Where’s the fire?” asked the Labourer.

“It must have fire,” the Smuggler agreed. “It must leave no doubt in their minds as to what we shall do if we don’t get our demands.”

“Which is to loot and plunder and take back what’s ours,” said the Lawyer.

“Tell them this,” said the Labourer. “Tell them that we are their brothers from hell, their angry kin, who shall slaughter them and theirs unless they bring out the wealth from under their beds and share it with us. Tell them we are the nightmare of their own creation come to burn and destroy and to take anything and everything they hold dear, so that they too can have a taste of what it means to have nothing. Tell them we have not forgotten who they are, and what they have done. We demand reparations now. Tell them that.”

The Boy heard him, open-mouthed with awe, and it frightened him to realise that he meant every word of what he said.

“That is not what we agreed,” said the Boy.

“But that is how it will be,” said the Labourer. “That is how they did it to us and how we shall do it to them. “Smash and grab, slash and grab.”

There was silence round the hut.