

Those New School Shoes

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The little girl makes her way down the dusty path. She walks stiffly, in a disarticulated gait, self-conscious of her new school shoes. These are the very first pair of proper shoes she has ever owned in her entire life and she was proud of them. Her parents saved for many months to afford those shoes, but they felt it was a good investment because their daughter was important and their standing in the community was such that she should not be ridiculed by being bare footed at school.

The path to the school crossed a stream and there she hesitated. Alongside the small stream was a group of soldiers, taking a short rest in the shade of the few trees that were sustained by this small stream meandering across the African savannah.

She was confused. The soldiers made her restless as she tried to pick her path across the mud caused by the cattle crossing. Focussing her full attention on the mud, she tried to avoid this soiling her brand new shoes, shiny in the African sun with just a hint of dust covering their otherwise unblemished perfection. Sensing her dilemma, a soldier approached, rifle slung across his shoulder and bush hat encrusted white with a ring of salt from the dried up sweat of the morning's patrol dangling from a lanyard to his left epaulette. The girl was afraid, but caught on the proverbial horns of a dilemma, what was she to do? Cross the stream through the mud and soil those shoes that her parents had sacrificed so much to afford, or accept the help of the soldier and risk being accused by the community of fraternizing with the enemy?

Sensing her dilemma, and recognizing his own small niece in the twinkle of that young girl's eyes, he raised his hand in greeting. Hesitatingly she responded. Smiling at her he motioned with his palm to wait as he strode over to a fallen log. He heaved, but the log was just too heavy so he motioned to the other soldiers to help him. At first they complained as only soldiers can, but one by one they slowly got involved. Together they dragged the log to the muddy crossing and manhandled it into position. The little girl focussed her attention on their boots, all scuffed and dusty as they slid in the mud while wrestling with the log. Then, once in position, the young soldier smiled and winked, motioning with his hand that she could now cross in safety. Balancing on the log she tripped her way across the stream and safely on the other side she walked with newfound purpose, proud that her new shoes were still clean, eager to show them off at school.

The Section Leader gave the command to load rifles and proceed with their patrol. The young soldier fell into his predetermined position, responsible for the left flank from 12 o'clock to 9 o'clock as he slipped in his magazine and chambered a round with a metallic *shiiii-clunk*. The Section snaked out onto the African savannah leaving the cool shade of the trees behind them, their young faces stern with anticipation as this brief interlude of human contact was pushed to the back of their minds. They simply could not afford to have a lapse in concentration.