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**Thousand Yard Stare**

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**A Message from the Mother of the Nation**

“They have guns and tanks, we have no arms. But we have stones. We have our boxes of matches. We have our bottles. ... With our necklaces, we will liberate this country!”

Nomzamo Winifred Zanyiwe Madikizela Mandela, April 1986, Soweto.

I arrive at the *Skerp Punt* Tactical HQ for a liaison meeting with my SAP counterpart to find a strange air that I have never encountered before. There is a buzz all around and it is clear that something is very different to my previous liaison meetings.

My counterpart in the SAP – a young Warrant Officer – seems unable to concentrate and the meeting goes all over the place with no clear focus. Then suddenly a young constable comes in, crouching as he whispers something in the Warrant Officer’s ear. He listens and reflects momentarily and with a resolute look on his face announces that he has to leave the meeting because something has just come up. He motions me to accompany him if I so wish. Sensing that something extraordinary is about to happen I consent and follow my counterpart as he leaves the room in a hurry.

We scramble over to a Casspir with its engine already running. The last time I saw one of these was when we were supporting Koevoet in Sector 10. I climb in, the only soldier conspicuous by my presence because of the nutria battledress I am wearing. I greet the policemen in the Casspir, all dressed in combat fatigues of a different pattern to mine. They stare past me with barely an acknowledgement that I have just greeted them. The air is pregnant with apprehension as the door slams shut. We move out at some speed, jostled around in the back. I look around. The first thing that strikes me is that unlike the Koevoet unit, nobody is sitting on top of the Casspir. Then I notice something else – nobody is talking. In fact, nobody is even making eye contact. The policemen have a vacant look in their eyes. Their clothing is dishevelled and their pockets bulge with invisible contents. There is no banter. No song. No chit-chat. No chirping from the resident clown that I know exists in every combat team I have ever seen.

Only silence except for the grinding of the machinery, the occasional rippling bleep from the VHF radios as a message is relayed and that vacant thousand yard stare on the faces of all the passengers.

We approach a clearing amongst a dense cluster of matchbox houses. I am immediately taken by a sense of physics as I gaze upon the crowd, because there is a clear differentiation in the behaviour of certain groups as they revolve like electrons at different energy planes, all locked into orbit around a single clearly-defined nucleus. This sense of order in an otherwise chaotic setting causes me to instinctively seek out the nucleus. On the one side a pall of smoke rises and it is here that the nucleus seems to be located. It is visible because it is surrounded by a clearly defined ring of high

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energy individuals, all milling around something that is the focus of their collective inward attention. Surrounding this high energy orbit is a second one of lower energy. These are different people, not as animated and somewhat older, not all inwardly focussed but clearly part of the greater whole.

The orbiting electrons part as the Casspir approaches, with the high energy individuals turning to face us, clearly in a state of heightened aggression.

The Casspir stops and the gaunt policemen with the thousand yard stares spill out, each clutching what seems to be a different sort of weapon. A shotgun comes into action while alongside me a Sergeant breaks open his *Snotneus* stopper gun. To my surprise he removes a torch battery from one of his bulging pockets and inserts this into the *Snotneus* in front of the massive cartridge. I ask him what the hell he is doing and he casually informs me that the rubber stopper bullets are “ineffective” under these circumstances, but a torch battery “does the trick”. I am shocked but do my best to conceal my somewhat naive response.

I feel profoundly vulnerable here, surrounded by gaunt policemen, each with a thousand yard stare and me clutching only my 9mm personal weapon, which strikes me as being totally inappropriate to the point of being laughable. The high energy electrons become distinctly more animated as we approach the centre of the nucleus.

My breath is taken away as I see it. The orange flames licking like hungry beasts dance across the walls of the tyre. A thick black pall rises. The air is filled with a myriad of sounds. The angry crowd is insulated from me somehow as I watch those mesmerising flames dance. Hungry demons engorge themselves on flesh like gluttons with an insatiable appetite. I suddenly become aware of the smell, the combination of a mass of humanity living in a place where all sanitation services have ceased to exist and hydrocarbons released from the petrol used to start the burning tyre. But above all the air has a unique quality, because it carries the distinct odour of burning flesh and recently-singed hair.

This is my first necklacing and I am shocked by what I see. Unable to comprehend the enormity of the scene around me I instantly understand the omnipresence of that thousand yard stare, which accompanied me to this scene in that silent Casspir with the bleeping ripple of the VHF radio and grinding machinery of war.

Today it seems is as good a day as any for a necklacing; and for me to finally lose my cherry of innocence.

A sensation goes through my body that I have never felt before and I instinctively know that my life has changed forever as I detach emotionally. I feel as if I have a golden umbilical cord connected to some massive placenta in the sky and I travel along that lifeline, looking down at the scene beneath me, ravenously searching for sustenance in this parched landscape populated by high energy electrons orbiting a burning nucleus. My spirit leaves me and dances above, flitting across the landscape at the speed of light, almost like a ball of plasma flashing beneath the loose puffs of cloud in a mirror image of the flames licking that twisted body. I see the policemen on my left and right, but this time from above. I am surprised at seeing myself milling

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around there in the middle of an ill-defined line of order floating like a loose molecule across a flammable sea of seething anger.

I lose all track of time as my spirit floats free of my body, refusing to come back and make me whole again, seemingly now to have a will of its own. The next I can recall we are back inside that Casspir and I too have a thousand yard stare, my spirit still absent from my body, rendering me an incomplete shell of humanity – a doer now – rather than a thinker and a feeler. I recall stopping at a fast food outlet on our way back to *Skerp Punt*, but I found the crispy skin of the fried chicken to be distinctly unappetising, so I chose to remain hungry instead, at least until my spirit returned from its lonely wandering.

**Death by Necklacing**

On 23 March 1985 a councillor in Uitenhage was accused of being a collaborator and sentenced to death by a People's Court consisting of militant youths. This sentence was meted out with the use of a tyre doused in petrol and draped around the neck of the unfortunate victim like a necklace. This was the first use of the practice, which rapidly became the weapon of choice in a campaign of intimidation designed to make Townships "no-go areas" where "liberation" could be claimed. The most famous case was that of Maki Skhosana who was necklaced, stoned and had a broken glass bottle placed in her vagina for her alleged role as a collaborator in the death of four boys who were playing with a hand grenade. This sent shock waves through the security force community, leaving every soldier with the fear of being captured by a mob and sentenced to this revolutionary justice by a People's Court. This unlocked a primordial response, which was to use extreme violence as a form of self-preservation. The most recent victim of a variant of this form of mob justice was Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave, who was killed during the xenophobic violence that engulfed South Africa in May 2008, so the seeds of such retribution are still with us, whether we choose to acknowledge them or not.

For the official transcript of the TRC hearing into the necklacing of Maki Skhosana on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July 1985, please refer to the website at <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/duduza/moloko.htm>. It must be noted that this particular necklacing made use of a glass bottle, so it is directly relevant to the text box at the beginning of this short story.