

Misfits

Uncle Philip leaned against the wall and watched us eat with disdain. He had made an incredible curry for the four of us, and we wolfed it down hungrily. Globes of mango chutney dribbled down Uncle Daniel's chubby chin. He didn't notice until Grand-mère wiped his chin clean with her napkin. Grand-mère and my aunt, Marie-Lise, chatted quietly with each other in French. I gazed out at the sugar-cane fields as I chewed on a piece of tender lamb, wondering why the hell we were eating curry on such a hot day. Philip didn't eat a thing. He lit up a cigarette and smoked silently.

I remembered how Uncle Philip used to show me how he could slot a cigarette into a gap in his gums where a tooth used to be. I used to think that was the coolest trick ever.

"Mimi! *Woza nami!*" Marie-Lise called to the black maid inside the house. "Philip is too proud to eat what he cooks," Marie-Lise said, giving her husband a dark look. Philip muttered something under his breath. Uncle Daniel belched and reached for another serving of curry.

"*Ne mangez pas plus,*" Grand-mère said, scraping some of the curry on Daniel's plate back into the serving dish. Philip grimaced and wiped the sweat off his brow with his sleeve.

"We need more beer. Let's go for a ride," Philip said to me. I gave Grand-mère and Daniel a questioning look. Daniel shrugged, his baby-face flushed red. Grand-mère gave Philip a wary look and pursed her wrinkled lips, but didn't say anything. I

reluctantly joined Philip in the truck parked in the driveway as the maid came out to clear the dishes.

The truck lurched forward onto a dirt road that wound its way through the sugar-cane fields. Philip wasn't wearing his seat-belt, but I quickly put mine on, despite Philip's disapproving stare. Philip slammed his foot down on the gas pedal and I almost bit my tongue off as we bounced over the bumps and dips in the poorly maintained road.

"Fuck Grand-mère," he said suddenly, flecks of spit flying onto the windshield. "I know what she says about me behind my back. And then she comes and eats my food and brings that fat pig Daniel. What a bloody cheek! Fuck her!"

Uncle Philip's turned toward me and continued his vicious tirade—his breath was vile and his teeth were yellow.

I stared in alarm at the road ahead, recalling Grand-mère's words on the car ride over: "Philip is a drunk. A rude drunk. *Mon dieu!* I don't know why Marie-Lise married him."

The truck turned a corner and we came upon a group of black workers sprawled on the grass and enjoying the sun by the side of the road. Philip slammed on the brakes and pulled over next to the workers, sticking his head out of the window.

"*Wenza msebenzi muni? Lutho oluningi! Jahela! Jahela,*" he yelled at them, making a shooing motion with his hand. The workers nodded at Philip, the whites of their eyes flashing, but they didn't move. Philip drove off, the wheels of the truck spewing up white dust.

"Those bloody kaffirs! They think they own this country now. How am I supposed to run this farm? All they do is sit around and smoke dagga," he said.

I was aghast. I couldn't believe he had just used the 'k' word. Didn't Philip know this was the 'new South Africa'? Yet he was running his farm as if apartheid was still at its height.

"Living in South Africa is like standing in a bucket of shit," Philip continued, "At first it smells, but then you get used to it. And then somebody adds a bit more shit to your bucket. It's disgusting, but you get used to it. And then somebody adds more, and more, and more, but by the time you want to get out, you can't because it's up to your head."

We arrived at the store and Philip headed in for some beer. I waited outside by the truck. The store was nothing more than a shack with a tin roof in the middle of nowhere. Litter was strewn all around—bits of shredded plastic, rusted metal car parts, tin cans. I looked back down the dirt road we had come upon. I saw a lone figure on an old bicycle meandering up the road. The bike had rusty chains and one of those old-fashioned hooters on it that you have to squeeze to make a sound. The figure wandered closer and suddenly I felt ill. It was one of Philip's workers, taking an impromptu break no doubt.

The worker came up to the store and jumped off his bike, wheeling it toward the entrance while whistling a tune. At that same moment, Philip strolled out of the store, an open beer in hand. When he saw his worker he froze. The worker stiffened and fell silent, staring coldly back at Philip. I inched back toward the truck, ready to get out of here when things turned ugly.

Philip strode up to the worker and reached out a hand. He grasped the hooter on the bike and squeezed it.

“Barp! Barp!”

The worker’s face lit up with a big smile and kept walking. I laughed and grabbed the beer Philip was holding out for me. We got into the truck—Philip chugged down his beer and opened a new one. He drove us back with one hand on the wheel and one on his beer can. He eased the truck gently over the bumps so that we didn’t spill our drinks.

Grand-mère, Daniel and I sat on the verandah and watched the sun singe the tops of the sugar-cane as it set. Philip amused himself by teasing Daniel relentlessly and laughing loudly. I asked Grand-mère about the time her and grand-père came to South Africa from Mauritius, lured by incentives from a government desperate to populate Africa with Europeans.

“I hate South Africa,” Grand-mère said. “I always have. I wish to be in France. Ahhh... *la France est magnifique*,” her eyes lit up at the thought of the mother-country.

When we got home Daniel made himself a snack and Grand-mère lit up a candle for Uncle Philip, sticking it under her gigantic statue of Mary. A week later I caught a plane to Canada and left Grand-mère, Daniel, Philip, Marie-Lise, the sugar-cane farm and South Africa for good.

That visit to the sugar-cane farm was the last time I ever saw Uncle Philip. Last I heard he was working as a chef in Paris. I can imagine him leaning in the doorway of the kitchen, watching fat Americans eat his incredible food with a look of absolute disgust on his face and a glass of red wine in his hand. I think he belongs there.