

## BRUSHSTROKES

The farm was a three hour drive from Bulawayo, right in the middle of Matabele Land.

For four generations the Robertsons had managed to make a living from their abundant fields. Most of them had lived, married and died in the same farmhouse.

Every generation had at least one unfortunate sibling who never made it to adolescence.

It was an enormous spread, more of a ranch than a farm, sixty thousand acres at least.

From the sealed main road it took a good fifteen minutes to reach the farmstead, bumping along a dusty track that had grass growing up the middle of it, high enough to tickle the chassis.

The weatherboard farmhouse was two stories high, with a Dutch Style pitched roof. There were several large grain stores, and sheds for hay, machinery and livestock.

Set back away from the main cluster there was a low red-brick building, that was used to house the servants and the farm workers.

A few months before one of the tractor drivers had been sacked and replaced by somebody half his age.

The replacement was a good man, a strong man, an honest man. He quickly fitted right in, was excellent at the job and could think for himself.

Caution Umkize was very happy with his new employment and made sure he was always polite and punctual, and courteous and well mannered.

*Remember Caution, Please and Thank You cost nothing* his mother was always telling him.

Things ran smoothly at first and he felt like he'd been working there all his life.

Early one morning, before his shift began, Caution walked over to the farmhouse and asked to speak with Boss Robertson. The kitchen girl told him to wait there, closed the door over but didn't shut it, and went inside calling the Boss's name.

Some minutes later the farmer came marching through, opened the door and saw the tractor driver standing there, looking nervous.

"Oh shit Caution." he said, "This is some bloody hour to come knocking on the door. What's the matter with you? Is there something wrong?"

“I’m sorry Boss but I don’t want to work here anymore.” the tractor driver said coming straight out with it.

Boss Robertson stared down at him, a bit confused. This was most unusual. As far as he was aware everything was going along fine. The new man had fitted in well and the farm manager had only good things to say about him.

Apart from that he didn’t want to have to think about a replacement. Not now, not with the harvest coming up. It was their busiest time of the year.

“So you don’t want to work for me anymore? Why not? Do I not pay you enough?” he asked, half in jest.

“No Boss it’s not that.” Caution replied without looking up.

“What is it then? You not got enough to eat or not enough beer? Or are you not getting your end away?” Robertson said winking at him.

“No Boss it’s not that either.” said Caution a little embarrassed.

“What the hell is it then? Come on spit it out man.”

“It’s the room. I can’t sleep in the room any more. There are bad dreams in there. Every night I see Ju-Ju in the darkness.”

Roberson didn’t know what to say.

Caution continued. “I am afraid of Tokolosh. He is looking under my bed Boss. I can’t stay here.”

Robertson thought for a moment rubbed his forehead then said.

“Go back to work just now and come to see me this evening after supper and we’ll decide what to do.”

When Caution returned Boss Robertson told him that he didn’t want him to leave. He said.

“Go and collect your things and bunk down in the tractor shed for a while until we can get this sorted out.”

The next day when the Boss asked him what they could do to make the room better Caution said he would like to send for a Shaman. He told the farmer he had a distant relative over the border in Zululand who was a witchdoctor.

Robertson agreed. “O.K. Send for him if you want,” he said, “but it’s coming out of your pay.”

A week later the relative arrived.

He and Caution had only ever met once, a long time ago, and at first they didn't recognise each other.

The relative didn't look much like a witchdoctor either, apart from the bizarre stick he carried.

At first sight, his wiry, bird-like body looked far too small for the colourless baggy shirt, and the scruffy, ill-fitting grey suit he wore.

His head seemed shrunken, and tied loosely around his scrawny neck, was a necklace of discoloured animal teeth and assorted chicken feathers.

He had sandals cut from old car tyres on his bare feet.

There were no formalities and after a brief conversation in their own language, Caution took the Shaman over to the servant's quarters.

For an intense hour the wizened **little** man spoke in voices and moved about the room as if looking for a scent or a sign.

In a shallow trance, he took a handful of dried rose petals from his jacket pocket crumpled them and let them fall to the **concrete** floor.

From the other he plucked a wrap of paper, opened it and blew the grey powdery contents into the atmosphere.

In all of this he swung and pointed the strange stick he was carrying.

With each movement the shells and beads and bones tied to it, rattled like wind chimes in a hurricane.

From the top of the thick end the white, baboon hair fly-whisk, was whirling fit for a dervish.

At last the Shaman stopped. Paused. Took his time and let his trance weaken.

Then he turned and looked towards the corner furthest from the door.

Picking up the only chair he went over to where the walls and roof came together.

Then standing on the seat he put his hand up into the eaves and felt about.

Moments later he removed a soft package wrapped in brown paper and neatly tied up with string. He blew the dust off, undid the bow and opened it. Inside there were four thick bundles of what looked like fine white **wool**.

The Shaman was delighted.

He did a little dance, picked up some of the hair, rubbed it between his fingers, sniffed at it and put it back.

He was serious again as he re-tied the parcel and handed it to Boss Robertson, who had watched his every move from start to finish.

Half an hour later the witchdoctor was gone.

After talking and haggling with Caution for ten minutes he took his fee, and got Boss Robertson's oldest son to drive him into Bulawayo, to get the bus back south in the morning.

Once he'd gone Caution collected his meagre belongings and moved back into his room.

That night he slept deep and untroubled.

Next morning he was at work as **normal**, and in his usual good spirits. He was quick to tell Boss Robertson that Tokolosh had vanished and that he would be more than happy to stay.

So he did, sleeping there every night for the next twenty years undisturbed.

Neither he nor the Boss ever mentioned the hair incident again.

The Farmer knew of course the moment he saw the bundles what had happened.

The woman who'd lived there before the tractor driver had been his grandmother's maid. Every night at bedtime she brushed her Madam's hair, one hundred strokes, no more, no less.

Each time she cleaned the hairbrush afterwards she'd kept the hair. When the old lady died a good few years ago the servant was also dismissed, since she was no longer required.

How long the parcel had lain unnoticed in the eaves, the Farmer could maybe hazard a guess, but how the Shaman knew it was there he would never ever know.

The next day when burning some garden rubbish in an old forty-five gallon oil drum, Boss Robertson tossed the bundle into the flames.

He watched it sizzle and melt and burn.

Even if he didn't believe in such things he still didn't want Tokolosh or any other Mumbo-Jumbo running around in his house.