Smiley by Linda Frysh

The skulls are laid out on a metal grate, one on top of the other, flies clustering and crawling over the bloody heads. I can't take my eyes off them, especially the bared teeth. I am hardly breathing.

"Very tasty, especially the tongue," says Gladstone. "They burn the hair off over the fire, then boil them for a few hours until they are soft."

The scene is laid out before me as if it has been there all along, just waiting. There are fires, acrid black smoke that burns my eyes, drifting ashes, and in the midst of this, the death's heads and the women.

I stop in my tracks, taking it all in, my heart beating loudly in my ears. The women do not look up as we come closer, but stay crouched over the fires.

The black faces painted with yellow pigment jump out at me, mask-like, impassive and intent - shapeless dark clothing, the headscarves bright red.

At some point, I get close enough to realize that the death's head that I see all around us is the head of a sheep, the eyes closed, lips pulled back in a grimace. The women are each holding one over the fire - the smell makes the bile rise in my throat. I am transfixed. This is more than I bargained for – and yet, this is what I have come home to see, the Africa that lived side by side with mine, though I never saw it.

I think about Mary who worked for our family, living in a small concrete room, in the servants' quarters at the back of the house. One weekend a month Mary would go back to Soweto to see her husband and children. I never set foot in a township in all those years.

I remember school mornings sitting at the kitchen table having a steaming bowl of Maltabella porridge, malty and satisfying.

"You eat it all now, Miss Lin. I'm not cooking for nothing," Mary would say, always neatly dressed in a green uniform with a white apron and a doek covering her head. She smelled of Pond's cold cream, Lifebuoy soap and the bleaching cream that she used on her face every day, a faintly chemical undertone.

I am the one who has jumped ship, fortunate enough to be able to pick up our whole family and move to an environment where crime is not a daily occurrence. The people who remained behind are not so lucky. Not much has changed for the residents of these townships. Those blacks that "make" it in the new economy live a life completely removed from this reality. They drive around in shiny black BMWs or Mercedes' and live in the formerly "white" suburbs of Johannesburg and Cape Town.

The detritus of a big city lies all around – corrugated iron, cans, rolls of wire, metal grates, cardboard boxes, pieces of wood, the unwanted refuse of other lives.

I am in Langa Township, outside of Cape Town with Gladstone, my new friend and guide. He is a Xhosa man, tall and strongly built – a man with an easy presence. I am greedy for experience, eager to know these *particular* people better. They were born and raised on the same land, yet remain as separate and different as fraternal twins.

The second woman has moved away and now wields an ax. She swings it almost lazily up, then brings it down with a force that doesn't seem possible from such a small body. The sound of the impact is loud, dense, a thwack that reverberates with each blow. She has cleaved the sheep's skull in half.

"You can buy half a smiley for five rand, the whole one is ten," says Gladstone.

We walk a little further and turn into an open space between two buildings. *The ground is strewn with refuse: bottles, empty cigarette cartons, newspaper. We enter one of the buildings and immediately the stench of urine is overpowering. It's hard to think about anything else.*

The room has the feeling of a bunker. Four men sit in the dim light at a table, talking and drinking beer. Everything is gray concrete: The walls, ceiling, floor, table. This is obviously the kitchen because there is a refrigerator against one wall. There is running water and electricity here, so it is a step up from some of the other dwellings, which have neither.

"Four men to a room. This is where I grew up," says Gladstone. "And my brother still lives here. These hostels were built to house the men who left their families and came to the city to look for work."

More concrete in the small bedroom, two beds and some shelves. Gladstone introduces me to his brother who is sprawled on the bed, smoking. He ignores us and hot shame engulfs me. I am an interloper, coming from my comfortable hotel in the city to intrude on this spartan life. *Is there no privacy? Is nothing sacred?* I mumble an apology and back out.

We walk on until we turn down a side street and arrive outside a small shack. Even though I am barely five feet tall, I have to bend down and duck my head to enter. Inside there are two men on a bench to one side and a woman sitting on a chair near the center. The woman wears a clean white dress, white headscarf and apron, her hands folded in her lap.

An air of quiet dignity and authority surrounds her. She looks at me, taking in my jeans and flip-flops, my short dark hair. I nod and smile at her, very much aware that this is her realm. The woman in white is the proprietor of this establishment, familiar with all that goes on here. She is also the one who makes the beer, having learned the trade from her mother and grandmother before her.

There are plastic tubs, shoes, clothing and plastic bags hanging from the ceiling and stuffed into corners. We sit down against the wall. It is quiet in the shebeen; no one speaks, though the men examine the unfamiliar visitors with dark, bottomless eyes. I wonder what they are thinking.

The air is thick with stories and secrets. They seem to swirl around the dimly lit interior, very much a part of the fabric of this place. The power of ceremony and ritual is here, and an age-old dialogue with ancestors.

Gladstone tells me how they soak the sorghum, then add maize and finally cook the brew over a fire in the large steel drums that are stacked all around. The fruit of this labor, a frothy white liquid, sits in the center of the floor in a half-gallon metal bucket with a wire handle.

"People come here not only to drink, but to socialize, discuss problems, and get advice," says Gladstone. "This drink must be present at every special occasion. And, for you, this is such a day because you have come home. I will ask the ancestors to watch over you."

I am honored and touched by Gladstone's willingness to confer this blessing on me. He picks up the bucket and takes a long draught smacking his lips with satisfaction. Then he passes it to me. It's heavy, but I take it from him, raise it to my lips and drink. I pass it on to the person next to me as the slightly sour taste lingers in my mouth. *Perhaps they are my ancestors, too.*

Back at the hotel, Gladstone follows me into the lobby. I feel sadness, nostalgia and a strong connection to this man who probably wasn't even born when we left the country. I thank him for his kindness and we smile at each other. There is a pause as we try to find the right words to say goodbye.

Then Gladstone takes my hand between both of his and makes a little bow. This is how I remember him.

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Written by Linda Frysh in 2024

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