

## The Shoemakers of Nakasero \*

The cobblers shop was below the mills. Below the fishmongers and the corner-shop butchers and the Co-op where we bought ammunition for our peashooters, where my father had begun work just before his fourteenth birthday. In the window where a pair of clogs and on their soles a pair of flamenco dancers had been picked out in nails and hand-painted. I remembered how the woman wore a crimson frock and the man tight black trousers. The clogs had brass toecaps and were made of oiled leather.

As a child my father had worn shoes rather than clogs, a fact he'd always been proud of, as if it marked him out as special. The other kids had clogged seven bells out of him and, despite the shoes, labour had stuck to him all his life. The cobblers shop had a doorbell that jangled over your head on a metal spring, bringing Carson limping from the back room in his grey apron. He'd lost a leg at Monte Casino. The shop counter was dark mahogany and the shop smelled of tanned leather and brown paper, neat's-foot oil, dubbin, heelball and brown paper. All the accoutrements of the cobbler's trade. Bullhide not bullshit, my father had said right there at the counter, with a light in his eyes that was the blue flash of thunder. I'd always wondered what Carson's artificial leg was made of. As far as my father was concerned, he had a job where he sat on his arse all day.

'Sah?'

You're right that it makes no sense – harking back to a mill town in the 1960s when I was walking through an African marketplace in the twenty-first century and mixing it all up together. As if Carson might limp from one of the shop doorways or leap up from one of the treadle-operated Singer sewing machines that were everywhere. Just like the machine my mother had used to make our clothes when we were children.

'Sah?'

A meat fly landed on my arm and I brushed it away. Maybe it was those black enamelled machines with their gold lettering that had sent me back, recalled my mother sewing clothes for the neighbours, or pinning up my father's trousers as he stood on a chair and ranted. My mother who could make any garment with her hands. My father who could shape even the most recalcitrant piece of metal. The cobbler who turned over a freshly repaired shoe in his hand to show the new leather gleaming. *Good for a few more miles.* It made no sense, admittedly, but then maybe that's all the sense there is. To be everywhere and anywhere at the same time. Somewhere and nowhere. To be beside yourself.

'Sah?'

The man's voice – a soft, insinuating voice – startled me. When I did look up I saw a small Ugandan man in a ragged tee-shirt and khaki pants. He looked about thirty, but it was

hard to tell. He had a wispy beard and his skin was paler than that of most Africans. His eyes were the lightest brown eyes I'd ever seen, like honey poured over almonds. Beautiful eyes that slanted down with slightly hooded lids.

‘Shoe, sah?’

He was holding out a pair of refurbished casual shoes. You saw them all over Kampala. Dead men's shoes re-cycled. They were made of tan-coloured leather and had plastic soles and had been polished until even the scuffmarks gleamed. They were shit. You needed good shoes in Kampala where the roads were broken and gave way to red dirt and potholed tracks. I shook my head. The man held the shoes closer, as if I hadn't looked at them properly.

‘Good shoes. Try them. Try them, sah?’

A marabou stork flew over the market and its shadow crossed the man's face. Darkening those amazing eyes for a moment. His arms were sinewy and the veins stood out on his hands.

‘Not for me, thanks.’

‘Not for you? No shoe? They your size. See?’

The man smiled incredulously. He thrust the shoes at me again, then looked down at my shoes, a pair of knackered brogues made in Dundee. Good shoes once, they had a coating of dust from the market and were stained with salt. Sweat was trickling from my hatband and down my neck.

‘Sah, you come!’

He tugged my sleeve and dragged me into a gap between two stalls.

‘Come! Come!’

We ducked under a carousel of leather belts, past a stack of watermelons with their sweet, sugary smell. Then we were in a narrow alleyway between buildings, catching the tang of human shit. A beggar held up his fingerless hand, but we brushed past and turned left into a narrow street and into a shop doorway that gaped under a blue and white striped awning and had yellow cellophane in the window.

‘Come sah, come sah!’

The shop was piled up with fabric, saris and shalwar kameez and made up suits hung from mannequins, the glass-fronted display cabinets were piled with ties and collars and socks and – yes – shoes, though of a kind I'd never buy. We entered a gloomy back room where an elderly Sikh gentleman with a white beard and a maroon coloured turban was watching a black and white television set. Gentleman? There seems no other word. My Ugandan guide spoke to him in Swahili and the Sikh eyed me carefully. He held out his hand to shake mine.

‘You are welcome.’

‘Thank you.’

‘You are looking for shoes?’

I shrugged, slightly helpless and more than slightly intimidated. The Sikh gentleman bent down and examined my brogues carefully. He drew a finger across the toe of one, making a line in the red dust.

‘I have. Come.’

The Ugandan man had taken the Sikh’s place and was screwing up the volume on a Kenyan soap opera. I felt a tug on my sleeve and followed the proprietor into another room at the back of the shop.

At first glance the room seemed to be draped with curtains but, as the Sikh pulled the curtain back, I saw that the walls were lined with shelves and the shelves were filled with boxes. Shoe boxes. I remembered the sharp smell of my father’s pantry – a mixture of shoe polish, turps and Swarfega – where he kept his shoes neatly stacked on shelves made from old fruit boxes.

The old man stooped in the gloom and pulled out a box, pulling down his spectacles on his nose to check the label.

‘You are a nine?’ It was a good guess.

‘Yeah, nine.’

He straightened up and handed me the box. ‘Here. You try. Very good shoes.’

I noticed that he was wearing light leather slippers that allowed him to shuffle almost noiselessly from room to room.

‘Come. Come to the light.’ He led me back to the room with the television where my Ugandan friend was now eating from a Tiffin tin of matoke and tilapia stew. He ignored us both. The food reminded me that I was hungry.

I took a seat and opened the box. Inside was tissue paper, then two velvet bags and inside each bag was a shoe of unmistakable quality. Dark brown stippled leather, richly oiled. Double-welted soles. The tongues were stitched into the shoe at the side to form waterproof webbing. Genuine veldtschoen.

‘I am Nayanpriti Singh.’ The proprietor smiled at me a little shyly. ‘These are good shoes, eh? Good shoes. You like them?’

Graham Mort

\* Short Story Extract