

STEVE CHIMOMBO

The rubbish dump

The boy squatted on the ground, bending over a small toy car. The bodywork consisted of rectangular pieces of cardboard inserted between a forest of bent pieces of wire. The wheels were empty boot-polish tins and the steering rod was one long reed which culminated in a wheel from the top of a large baby-powder tin.

The expression on the boy's face was a study in concentration: contracted mouth, wrinkled nose, furrowed brow and slit eyes. His hands worked impatiently on short pieces of wire that had come loose in the chassis. After a moment, he straightened up with a satisfied grunt, revved the engine, and burst into song:

*Azungu nzeru
kupanga ndege
si kanthu kena
koma ndi khama.*

The shrill notes pierced the air and filled the civil service quarters for a few minutes. The song was interrupted by the squeak, rattle and thump of a wheelbarrow along the dusty road twenty yards away from the last row of houses. The boy's song dangled in the air, faltered, and fell. The squeak, rattle and thump increased steadily in volume as it approached.

It was Mazambezi. That's what everyone called him – behind his back. Mazambezi, the airport garbage collector, pushing his wheelbarrow.

The boy stopped manoeuvring the car into the space between the two broken bricks. His body went slack as he remembered that it was Friday and he had missed the big plane landing, coming from London. Locally, they called it 'Four Engine'. Mazambezi was bringing in the rubbish from that plane, which meant it had landed hours ago. The

boy cursed himself for having forgotten to be on the balcony to watch the passengers in their expensive clothes stepping down from the plane, carrying large bags, cameras and all sorts of mysterious things from far-off lands. It was now too late to run to the airport. The visitors would have been driven off to their various destinations by now. Even the outgoing passengers would have boarded the plane.

The increasingly piercing whine of a plane about to take off confirmed this. The boy gazed at where he knew the plane would appear in the sky. A moment later, the corrugated-iron rooftops rattled violently as the thundering roar threatened to tear them off. This was one disadvantage of living near an international airport. Every now and then, the staff quarters were shattered by mini-earthquakes caused by planes landing or taking off. Not that the boy minded. The noise filled him with an almost superstitious awe and reverence at the intelligence that could make those big things fly like that in the sky.

A few minutes later, the boy was straining his eyes to follow the silver streak overtaking and outstripping the clouds. After a moment or two, he could see it no longer. He wondered who would be on it today, and where they would be going. His father had once told him that the plane stopped at such places as Salisbury and Johannesburg, before going on to England. When he could read, he would have fun finding these places in the book his father had told him all the famous places on earth were written. Still, it was a pity he had not been on the balcony today.

The rumble of the wheelbarrow was very near now. It sounded like the feeble spluttering of an ancient motorcycle, too old to start yet persisting in igniting for a few moments. The boy manoeuvred his car between the two bricks and took the path that joined the road Mazambezi would take. The rubbish dump was only a hundred yards away from his house.

'Moni, Joey,' the man greeted the boy.

'Moni.' Joey stopped a few feet away to watch his progress.

'You haven't gone to school today?'

'We've got a month's holiday.'

'That's good.'

'What have you got this time?'

'I don't know,' Mazambezi replied. 'A few pieces of cheese mixed with vomit, maybe.'

Joey crinkled his nose at the mention of vomit. Someone had told him once that the passengers on the plane sometimes vomited in bags provided for that purpose. Joey wondered what made people vomit when flying in a plane. He had seen his father vomit in the house when drunk. It was not very nice.

Joey kept his distance and watched the old man push the antiquated machine in front of him. The machine seemed to be an extension of Mazambezi. Joey could not imagine him without it, nor it without him. Both had been one of the first quaint scenes he had noticed when his family had been transferred to this airport district.

The machine had once been a gleaming piece of metal like the shiny planes at the airport, but that must have been long ago, in the hardware shop. Now it was marked at irregular rusty intervals with layers of flattened, dried-out bits of what once had been cheese, canned beef and other such nondescript things. It wore the indifferent colour of a piece of metal dug up from damp earth after ages. The wheel revolved round a worn-out axle. This was where the agonising squeak came from. Apparently grease had been applied to stop it, but that too was years ago. Only blackened encrustations were left to commemorate the fact.

They made quite a pair, these two: the dry and wet seasons had left their marks on both man and machine. The tattered rags of the old man were more suitable for the pit than for wearing. Clearly visible in many places through the torn overalls were multi-coloured – because of additional patches – khaki shorts. An equally ancient army jungle hat, pulled closely over the head, served as protection against the dry heat. The brim had a wide gash in it, so that the headgear was more of a cap than anything else. The short black hair underneath was mixed with a lot of grey, giving it the colour of sooty lime.

The rubbish pit made itself felt as they neared. Wave after wave of stench enveloped Joey and Mazambezi, and went on in its oppressive embrace to the native quarters.

Joey remembered the revulsion he had felt during the first days he had noticed Mazambezi's daily ritual. He had followed the old man after a week or two of suppressed curiosity. Joey had wondered what

made the old man take so long at the rubbish pit after tipping his load. The odour had got thicker and more oppressive as he had crept nearer and nearer where the old man sat gazing into the pit. Joey's nostrils twitched violently as the offensive rush of foul air flowed into him, past him, until he felt as though he was swimming in liquid rot. It clawed at his throat and settled in his stomach. Nausea hit him. He stumbled over a projection and cried out as he fell on to some disgustingly soft, sticky substance. He shuddered at the contact, convulsed for a few moments, and retched painfully. A hand fell on his shoulder as he tried to get to his feet.

'Are you all right?' The gruff voice of the old man seemed to come out of the ooze around him.

'Don't touch me!' he shouted. His face contorted, he sprawled backwards into the mess again, instinctively recoiling from the other.

'I said, are you all right?'

'Don't come near me!' he yelled wrathfully. 'You dirty, filthy, old Mazambezi!'

The old man straightened up slowly. Joey succeeded in his second attempt to get up, and sped off across the field that separated the pit from the houses. He glanced back once, from a safe distance, to see the old man settle back in the position he had found him in. Well, Joey thought, at least he had satisfied his curiosity. The old man spent some time rummaging in the debris and salvaged left-over food from the load. This he piled on to a piece of paper and ate. In his blindness, Joey had fallen trying to communicate to the man in the tower at the airport in Tokyo, in the manner his father had taught him: 'Request permission to land,' he intoned over and over again as he circled round, 'request permission to land. Can you hear me? Over.'

'Look, Joey,' a voice interrupted the pilot. 'I've got a real plane for you.'

It was Mazambezi. He had walked soundlessly from the pit without his wheelbarrow, and was holding out a miniature 'Air Rhodesia' to him. Joey looked fearfully at him. The brown eyes were almost apologetic. The boy backed a step, his mouth working. He glanced at his home, grabbed the plane, and ran as fast as he could to behind the kitchen. There he knelt down and held the plane to his chest, and panted for a few minutes. There were tears in his eyes as, after a time,

he looked again about him. The old man was gone. Joey had not heard the wheelbarrow grinding off. He stood up and peeked round the corner of the kitchen. He pulled back and put the plane under his shirt. It made a bulge that would not have deceived anyone. Joey quickly crossed his arms where the bulges were most pronounced. With a palpitating heart, he started shaking his shoulders ostentatiously, all the while walking towards the house singing:

*Azungu nzeru
kupanga ndege
si kanthu kena
koma ndi khama.*

Luckily, his mother was cleaning the main bedroom. Joey ran to the little room where he slept. He found his school bag with some exercise books in it and quickly hid his 'Air Rhodesia' in there. Among the school books were an odd assortment of foreign coins, tourist guides, empty cigarette packets and so on, collected from the airport. Every time he went to the balcony, he came back with one or two more items to add to his treasure. During the holidays, it was easy to hide them there. No one would think of looking for anything in his bag.

Joey unrolled his sleeping mat and lay down. He listened to his mother cleaning. His arm stole to the bag and came out with the plane. He inspected it carefully. It had a broken tail, but if he held it where the tail should have been it would pass as an airworthy craft.

'Joey! Are you in there?'

'Yes, Mother,' Joey answered, precipitately shoving the plane back into the bag and pushing it against the wall. When the door opened, he was breathing heavily on the mat.

'What are you doing down there?' His mother's imposing frame filled the doorway.

'I - I have a headache, Mother.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'You were busy, Mother.'

'Too busy to tell me you are ill?'

'I - I -'

'Come here, Joey.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'Now, I won't have you pretending you're sick.' The inevitable finger was two inches away from his nose.

'No, Mother.'

'I saw you running about and singing not a few minutes ago.'

'I - I - Mother -'

'Don't lie to me.'

'No, Mother.'

'Good. Now, I want you to go to the grocery to get me a pound of sugar and a packet of tea leaves.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'Here's the money.'

Joey took the money without a word and went out, worried. What if his mother found the plane? He sped to the grocery and was back in record time. His mother met him with, 'I thought you had a terrible headache.'

'I - I - it's gone, Mother.'

'Good. Now, help me move these things so that I can clean your room. Do you have to be so messy?'

Joey ran to the school bag and held it tightly against him.

'I said everything, not just your bag.'

'Yes, Mother.'

Joey put the bag gingerly on top of his other books, clothes and mat, and carried them out of the room. He put them in a corner and stood over them. Moments later, his mother called out to him that she had finished. Another careful operation took the objects back to his room.

'You're acting very strangely.' His mother was looking hard at him. 'Are you sure your headache is gone?'

'No, Mother.' Joey avoided looking at his mother. 'It's come back.'

'Maybe,' she said. 'You can lie down.'

Joey unrolled his mat again and lay down. He felt calmer now. His father came home late that night, drunk again and singing, 'For he's a jolly good fellow, and so say all of me.' Joey listened as he noisily asked for his supper. His mother's voice came faintly to Joey's ears at intervals, as his father explained loudly that a white man had bought him the drinks. The white man was a nice man, he proclaimed, for - it was his favourite question - where would the black man be without him? When he was in that mood, he could be tedious. He would go on

enumerating the good things the white man had brought to the country: jobs, cars, aeroplanes, not to mention booze. Joey fell asleep as the voice droned on about Africans, who should be eternally grateful, now living in decent houses, wearing decent clothes, and leading decent lives. His mother had retired to the bedroom, although he knew she was listening. His father spoke for all the world to hear.

It took Joey a week to muster enough courage to go and meet Mazambezi on the road. He thanked him shyly for the plane, but the old man only grunted something that was drowned in the squeak, rattle, thump of the wheelbarrow. Joey followed hesitantly behind the two. The old man's cracked feet made little eddies of dust as he trudged on. The overalls were as soiled as the machine. Joey quickened his steps to walk alongside Mazambezi.

'What have you got this time?'

'I don't know.' The old man was looking straight ahead of him. 'A few lumps of meat with the usual mixture.'

Joey was careful not to crinkle his face. The man and the boy turned into the path that led to the rubbish dump. The nauseating smell got stronger as they got nearer.

The pit was very old and large, but shallow. It had been there long before Joey was born. The original rubbish had putrefied enough to turn into earth underneath. It was not Mazambezi alone who used the place. The civil servants also did. It abounded in greying pieces of *nsima* scraped from the bottoms of pots, yellows and greens of banana, pawpaw and orange peel, chaff of sugar cane or maize, not to mention baby, chicken and dog shit. Every imaginable kind of waste matter found its way into the pit. The fresh rubbish, the insides of chicken and guts of fish, were feasts for bloated bluebottles. They and the fruit flies buzzed angrily like bees, when the man and the boy reached the mouth of the pit. The crows circled above them, cawing noisily. Other forms of life bred in the empty milk, fish and beef cans strewn about the pit.

'Did all that come from the plane?'

'Yes.'

'They must eat a lot.'

'When the white man eats, he eats.'

'It's not only the white man who travels in the planes.'

'No. But still it's the white man's food. You don't see *khobwe* or *mgaiwa* in the wheelbarrow, do you?'

'No. What do the Wenela people eat?'

'Bread.'

'Oh?'

'Just imagine,' Mazambezi was all of a sudden talkative. He had stopped the wheelbarrow at the edge of the pit and picked out a can from its depths. 'Just imagine,' he repeated vehemently. 'Where do you think this can came from?'

'London?'

'No.'

'Paris?'

'No. It was made in Hong Kong,' he announced triumphantly. 'I sit here every day and look into the pit. I pick up bits of paper or beef cans and look at them and imagine where they came from. Japan? Russia? England? America? South Africa? As I sit here munching bits of cheese, a whole world is opened up to me. How many thousands of miles has this can of fish travelled? What places has this empty packet of biscuits visited? What person vomited into this bag? What language does he speak? What hopes and dreams does he have? I don't need to ride in their planes. As I sit here, Russia, America, Hong Kong, England are all in my grasp. They all find their way into this rubbish dump.'

'I do the same,' Joey interrupted, 'when I go to the balcony to watch the planes come and go. Every day at school, as I open my books, I wonder if I will ever be educated enough to read more about these places. Even visit them. Just imagine being able to walk in the streets of London or New York or Tokyo!'

'I know how you feel.' Mazambezi had a faraway expression on his face as he looked at the boy beside him.

'But I've also seen the places.' Joey's eyes lit up.

'Have you?'

'Yes. Every day, when I drive my car, or fly the plane you gave me, I see them so clearly. I drink Coca Cola in New York, have tea in London, and go for a drive in Tokyo.'

They sat at the edge of the dump, legs dangling into the pit, and looked at the broken bottles made in England, or squashed cans of food

made in the USA, and plastic odds and ends made in Japan or Russia. Each was lost in his own thoughts. Humid putrefaction wafted around them, into them, and through them to the native quarters. The crows circled above them like black planes about to land. In the dump, the yellow, grey and brown flies also circled and dived into juicy offal.

'Here,' the old man interrupted their dreams, 'have a piece of cheese. Maybe it came from South Africa.'

Joey stretched out a hand. He had decided to lean against the wheelbarrow for more comfort. He chewed the stale cheese, silently watching the antics of the flies on a pool of vomit. The buzzing of the flies and the cries of the crows seemed to be the only sounds, but this was interrupted by the rising cadences of a plane starting up.

'It's the "Four Engine",' Joey remarked.

'Yes, it's the big plane taking off.'

'I wonder if it will stop in Salisbury.'

'Maybe.'

'I wonder who's in it?'

'Oh, the usual. Rich fat white men, brown men, and a few blacks.'

'Students going for more education.'

'Yes, I forgot about those.' Mazambezi stood up with a grunt, and wiped calloused hands on his overalls. 'I've got to be going too.'

'Goodbye,' said Joey slowly. He too straightened up from the wheelbarrow. 'We'll be meeting again tomorrow?'

'Yes.' The old man lifted the bars of the machine. In a few minutes, the squeak, rattle and thump faded in the distance. Joey wondered who would die first – the man or the machine. The rattle, squeak and thump of the machine and the stoic silence of the man behind it had the same quality as the mournful hoot of an owl. But Joey knew that the daily exchange of 'What has the big plane brought today?' – 'Oh, bits and pieces from the white man's land' would continue for some time yet. The left-overs, garbage and whatever would keep finding its way into the waiting rubbish dump; the flies and crows; Mazambezi and Joey.

E. B. DONGALA

The man

... No, this time he won't get away! After forty-eight hours, he had been tracked down, his itinerary was known and the village where he was hiding identified. But how many false leads there had been! He had been seen everywhere at once, as if he had the gift of ubiquity: dedicated militants had apparently run him down in the heart of the country without, however, managing to capture him: a patrol which had been parachuted into the northern swamps claimed they had badly wounded him, providing as their only proof traces of blood that disappeared into a ravine; frontier guards swore they had shot him in a canoe (which had unfortunately sunk) as he tried to escape by river: none of these claims survived closer investigation. The already tight police net was tightened still further, new brigades of gendarmes were created, and the army was given *carte blanche*. Soldiers invaded the working-class quarters of the city, breaking down the doors of houses, sticking bayonets into mattresses filled with grass and cotton, slashing open sacks of *foo-foo*, beating with their rifle butts anyone who didn't answer their questions quickly enough, or quite simply cutting down anyone who dared to protest at the violation of his home. But all these strong-arm tactics achieved nothing, and the country was on the verge of panic. Where could he be hiding?

It had been an almost impossible exploit, for the father-founder of the nation, the enlightened guide and saviour of the people, the great helmsman, the president-for-life, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and the beloved father of the people lived in a vast palace out of bounds to the ordinary citizen. In any case, the circular security system contrived by an Israeli professor with degrees in war science and counter-terrorism was impregnable. Five hundred yards from the palace perimeter, armed soldiers stood guard at ten-yard intervals, day