

Antoni Twine

AZIKWELWA ("We Shall Not Ride")

They had taken him with them when they had gone to the meeting. It was a hot Sunday in Alexandra Native Township, and thousands of people were crowded into No. 3 Square.

Old Isaac found it difficult to follow what it was all about. He could not hear what the people were saying.

His ears had started to fail him many years ago and, because of this, the baas for whom he worked at the laundry was sometimes very angry with him.

He had gone through life doing what the White Man told him to do without question. He felt it disrespectful to hesitate when he was given an order, or to show that he hadn't understood. But, because his ears were no longer as they had been when he was a young man, quite often now, he didn't understand and, in his willingness to please, he would do what he thought the White Man wanted him to do, and sometimes the baas would shout at him because he had unwittingly done wrong.

His son Joseph had once told him that when the white men's ears failed them, they went to the store and bought a new part to put inside the ear to make them hear well again. Just as one replaced a worn part on one's bicycle. Old Isaac had found this very hard to believe but one day Joseph pointed out a white baas who had a new part from the store in the inside of his ear, and explained that it had cost a lot of money. That was why the baas had tied a piece of cord to it, so that he wouldn't lose it.

On their way back to the house in 5th Avenue, where Old Isaac lived with his wife and thirteen of his children and grandchildren, Joseph tried to explain to the old man what the meeting had been about.

"They want us to pay a penny more every time we go on the bus—5d instead of 4d," he said. "So, tomorrow we must walk, and the next day, and the next. For six months, if necessary, to try to make the white people understand that we are poor people. We do not ask to live nine miles out of the town. The White Man has put us here and, if he wants us to live here, he must help us to travel to and from our work, or we starve.

Unlike his father, Joseph had had no difficulty in hearing or understanding the speakers.

Old Isaac thought of the tobacco he would have to do without if he were to pay that extra penny on the bus fare. Already the £12 he earned every month was carefully budgeted. There were the rates and the water, transport, the already inadequate food, and only what clothing was absolutely essential. The only extra he ever had was his tobacco.

Of course there was Joseph. He earned £15 a month. And there were his wife and his two daughters. They all took in washing. But they had to go by bus to fetch the washing from the white people's homes, and take it back there when it was done, and that meant bus fares out of the £2 a month that they earned.

There were the young people to be kept and fed. The children, his grandchildren—the little ones, and the young boys, just grown up, who had become such a problem.

It was so very difficult to find work for these young lads. They had been born in Alexandra, in the very house where they lived with their grandfather, but Alexandra is outside the boundaries of Johannesburg, and the law does not permit anyone from outside to seek work in Johannesburg without a permit, which is not easy to acquire. Of course, it would have been quite in order for them to have found domestic work outside the municipal boundary, but the number of young Africans seeking employment far outstrips the number of houses outside the municipal boundary of Johannesburg and, besides, Old Isaac's grandsons had passed standard VI at school. Their ambition lay in the city.

At 3 a.m. on Monday morning the march towards the city began. After a meagre breakfast of porridge with skimmed milk, and dry bread, the workers set off cheerfully in twos and threes.

Old Isaac was one of the first to leave the township. He was expected at the laundry at 6 a.m. and for years he had never been late. He started off, hobbling towards the city, leaning heavily on his old stick.

He was only a little late at the laundry, but he could see the baas was not pleased with him.

"I will have to leave earlier tomorrow," he thought. If he lost his job, he knew that he would never find another. No one wanted an old man, and what would happen if the family had to do without the £12 he brought them every month?

He was tired, very tired, because he had to work with the machine that did the ironing. There was no sitting down for Old Isaac, and he felt that he must work extra hard so that the baas would forget that he had been late that morning. "I must leave my bed earlier tomorrow morning," he kept thinking.

It was dark when Old Isaac got back to the house in 5th Avenue. There was some watery stew waiting for him, and some of the green vegetable which, mercifully, grows in abundance all over Alexandra, and which the inhabitants use as spinach. But it was an inadequate meal for a man who had walked 18 miles and done a day's hard work.

The following day Old Isaac rose with difficulty at 2.30 a.m. His body and legs ached, he had blisters on his heels and the soles of his feet hurt because there were holes in his shoes. But there was no money for new shoes, or even to have the old ones mended.

He started his long walk. The buses were there at the stop, but they were empty. He longed to climb into one of them, but he didn't dare. People were watching to see that no one used the buses, and they would probably kill any one who did. Besides if they used the buses today, it would mean that they had suffered yesterday for nothing.

He felt sorry for the buses though. The buses had always given him good service. It was 20 years since they had asked for more money and all that time things had become more and more expensive. It must be difficult for the buses too. But then, they were the White Man's buses, and it was the White Man who made the black people live so far from their work. When a white man was poor, he was allowed to live close to his work.

The second day was as hot as the first. Johannesburg was experiencing one of the worst heat waves for many years. It wasn't so bad in the morning. Old Isaac left home long before the sun was up. But in the afternoon, it blazed down relentlessly on the returning workers and, several times Old Isaac had to stop to wipe the sweat from his old wrinkled face.

Sometimes he heard some of the white baases at the laundry talking about the bus boycott—"imagine making all that fuss about a penny. Oh, well, it's just a lot of agitators. I've got no sympathy at all." And every night, the bicycles and lorries lay idle, locked in the yard of the laundry until the next morning. The bicycles and lorries that might have helped a faithful old employee like Old Isaac who, even if he could have afforded that extra penny, did not dare ignore the boycott.

On the fourth day, Isaac had climbed the steep hill out of town and was leaning on his stick trying hard to get his breath back so that he could go on to the township. The pain in his chest, which had worried him since Tuesday, was very bad.

A small motor car stopped near him, and a white lady asked him if he were going to Alexandra. "Jump in," she said.

She drove him in the little car all the way to the township. His gratitude knew no bounds, but he was inarticulate, and he was

embarrassed, and he didn't really know how to thank the kind white lady who had helped him.

She saw that he was a very old man, and she told him that if he were standing outside the front of the railway station the following evening and every other evening while the bus boycott lasted, she would drive him, in the little car, back to the township.

That night his heart was full of joy. No longer would there be that long hot walk home after his work. The walk in the morning, after sleep had refreshed him, wasn't nearly so bad. And he could easily manage nine miles in a day. Now there would be no fear of his losing his job and not having the £12 to give to the family every month.

He thought how he would make the kind white lady a bird of clay. He had learnt to model animals and birds from clay when he was at the little farm school in the Free State, many, many years ago. He had made a great many clay birds in his time. He had even sold some of them. He liked to sit in the sun on a Sunday and mould the little models. He would make the kind white lady a bird just like those that used to fly down to the river on the farm when he was a boy.

But that night the pain in his chest was much worse, and when he lay on his bed he seemed unable to get his breath.

Next morning it was clear that the old man was very ill, and that morning he did not set off on the long march.

Joseph went to the laundry to tell Old Isaac's baas that the old man was ill and could not come to work.

"I've heard that one before," was the reply. "Well, he'll have it docked off his pay. Lazy old blighter!"

At 5.30 p.m. a small car with a young woman in the driver's seat drew up outside the front of the railway station. It waited there until 5.45 p.m., and then it drove off in the direction of one of the residential areas.

The young woman parked the car and went into a large building with a carpeted lobby. She took the lift to the second floor. The door of her apartment was opened for her by an African maid. She went into the kitchen to see what the maid was preparing for her dinner. There was a chicken, green peas and potatoes, and she knew there were frozen strawberries and cream in the refrigerator. In the sitting room she listened to the news on the radio while the maid was preparing her bath. She thought of the old man she had picked up the day before. "They are all the same—utterly unreliable."

Meanwhile, Old Isaac had had his second heart attack. He knew he would never have to walk, leaning on his stick, to the city again. Never

again would he ride in the bus. He wondered how the family would manage without his £12. But then, of course, there would be one less mouth to feed. That would help. It was a pity. He had wanted so much to make a bird just like those birds that used to fly down to the river on the farm, for that kind white lady.

RAIN

Alden A. Nowlan

It is not rain itself that children cry for
but being shut away; I know the feeling:
homesick for everywhere I've never been
I too sometimes look sad, though not at windows.