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Los Toros

Headlights blared in front of us as we unzipped our flies and unabashedly pointed in the direction of the oncoming cars. One car stopped, and an attractive girl—as far as I could see—seated in front, her jet black hair flying in the wind, gleamed with a smile. She waved.

Instinctively I waved back—and felt wetness against my hand.

The others, Kaiso, Boyo, Chen, burst out laughing. The girl also laughed, it seemed, white teeth glistening in the semidarkness.

Los Toros we called ourselves. With our black slacks and red shirts—a bull embossed on the left pocket—and scented brylcream styling our Elvis Presley hair, we looked perfect. Of course, there were other gangs, like the *Argonauts*, made up of older boys and grown men: who were Greeks and other ancients. We, *Los Toros*, were the real thing, however. We rode along on our Raleigh bicycles on the winding Canje Road, that girl still laughing in my mind; hair streaming in the wind.

Now we figured we were no longer part of the British Empire, independent as we were, maybe Hispanic in the genuinely Latin world of South and Central America. Screaming this out, we rode on, pumping at the pedals, daring the world to tell us otherwise. Brazilians, Venezuelans, all the other nationalities, we also were. And more boisterous we became, imitating dogs, pigs, a whole range of animals. Baying at the moon next, tearing away at the night itself. And hinterland cats growled in us, fierce, blood-curdling. Then the ancestral spirits, like an old ritual, voices of the dead; and sugar plantation owners . . . the slaves buried alive when their

white masters went to the other world. One slave screaming out in me for mercy; then rhapsodic, full of rage.

I rode ahead of the others, in night's darkness; my throat dry. But Kaiso quickly caught up with me, breathing hard. A sound like a heavy grunt.

He rode close to me as we neared the old church with the wide cemetery, headstones sticking out like sentinels. A mighty *saaman* tree stood out in the middle of the cemetery silhouetted against the church, a spire only rising above, as if stemming from the wide umbrella of branches. More shadows and shapes, moving, dancing oddly; an ominous air hung heavy. Kaiso breathed harder alongside me. Zinnia and frangipani amidst rotten sugar cane and molasses smells.

We pedalled on in the direction of the giant factory which throbbed incessantly, the grinding noise stupefying. Ahead was the white overseers' compound: with large palatial houses and well-manicured lawns. The night rode in us, as we quickly started another round of cries, now becoming a plethora of birds, tropical and temperate, whistling and screeching; then babbling sounds, a running brook. All the while the factory hummed, throbbed. One long night after another.

We wiped the sweat from our faces and talked, imagining wars fought over nameless boundaries. Then, a vicarious peace on a makeshift negotiating table. We wanted full independence for our country, fifteen-, sixteen-, and seventeen-year-olds as we were; all untested youths. Kaiso looked at me with a vague smile. A twist of his mouth, nostrils dilating.

Day superseding, supplanting. "See them," cried the village women pointing, Madrasi handkerchiefs on their foreheads, teeth gleaming against brown and black skin.

"Crazy, they are. All crazy!" screeched one higher, handkerchief a distinct knot above her eyes. Then she laughed, pointing at us, waving us off in an odd ceremony.

We sucked in air in large gulps; it was so hot, our tropics. Yet we rode on, as if this would be the last time. Never! Children playfully hurled stones at us, they too laughing as we stuck out our tongues at them.

"*Los Toros! Los Toros!* Look at them—look!"

We revelled in this attention, recognition.

At a village well, one girl demurely turned from her bent position at an angle to look at us . . . the same long-haired attractive one I'd seen before? And Boyo, the tallest among us, approached her on the pretext of asking for water, touching the embossed bull on his shirt pocket. Small talk, a smile, a shadowy face. Laughter, against Boyo's smiles.

The rest of us watched, tongue-tied.

Imitating James Dean and Elvis Presley, Boyo was; then Paul Newman, Marlon Brando. Gleeful, he pointed to us, water gushing out from the well. But the girl waved us off with a determined grin, a face of promises yet to keep.

Kaiso came alongside me again, sensing what was passing through my mind; he, the politician among us, always quoting some obscure fact or statistic: where he got it from I never knew.

"We're only pretending," he said, steadfastly looking ahead.

"What you mean?" I sucked in air, it was more humid than ever.

He pedalled on, face set in a serious way, uncompromising. Then he spoke quickly, angrily: we were only interested in girls. Why not other things as well? His hands shook like the tremor of leaves, nervous as he seemed the more he talked. His words' ways, without uniformity; only an evenness of purpose, determination.

"Like what?" I blurted out, catching my breath.

"Politics, man."

I figured Kaiso was already a fanatic of sorts. His previous talk about ideology, things he believed, what he objected to in his silently dour way: racing through my mind. Now he said we should form a study group. Why not, eh? Maybe we were just decadent, he muttered, lips throbbing.

I turned, looking at the others, Boyo talking. "Girls are fun," he said.

"They're not," shouted Kaiso, with a grimace.

Molasses scent in the air once more mingled with that of crabs, molluscs, a Corentyne wind coming to us in the Canje.

Kaiso added, like an afterthought: "We can get all the girls we want later."

"Eh?" two or three others chorussed.

"Can we?" asked Chen, the only Chinese among us, as if doubting this.

Kaiso's thin features appeared thinner, lips a distinct tremor. He pinned me to a corner when we stopped, and I listened. "This country's

ours," he said, as if there was any doubt in my mind. But the way he said it seemed the country was never ours.

"The people here, they work only as coolies, see. That's all." His eyes glinted a strange malevolence.

"It will change," I muttered.

"When?" he shot back.

I shrugged.

He kept on talking, demanding, using a number of heavy-sounding words; the corners of his mouth twitching. I only remembered unzipping my fly, pissing in the full glare of the oncoming cars . . . that girl, long hair streaming in the wind. Kaiso cringed. "You're decadent."

"Oh?"

"The whole gang o' you, all!"

I was frightened by the look on his face: he didn't seem like the same Kaiso I knew all these years, the one with whom I grew up, like brothers.

I muttered, inanely, "I am not; we're . . ."

"I'll leave de gang!"

"You won't, Kaiso." I figured he'd never.

"I will, soon enough!"

If he did *Los Toros* we'd no longer be, such a bond I thought we had; we were enjoying our status more than ever. And I'd come to believe we'd always be *Los Toros*, no matter what. But Kaiso was threatening to break it all up now.

I didn't want him to.

The next evening, the clouds coming down from the sun almost.

Kaiso rode behind.

Boyo once more doing most of the talking, boasting. Chen too boasted about something or the other, saying he'd one day play tennis at Wimbledon: he, the tennis fanatic among us. And we all wanted to know about Wimbledon, we'd go there to cheer him on.

"Could I join you there too?" asked Chris, the curly-headed one.

Chen laughed in his face. "Wha' you want to live in England for? Is only for white people," he sneered. "And like me, a professional."

"Ha!" returned Chris.

"I'll be the greatest tennis player, you'll see."

"How so?" someone else quipped.

"Cause I goin' to practice night an' day."

"Then you'd get all de girls, eh," said Boyo with a smirk, riding closer to him, playfully slapping him on the shoulder.

Chen seemed embarrassed now. "Yes, maybe. I'll keep on playing tennis, an' I'll be travelling to various countries around the world." He laughed harder, eyes gleaming, thinking of going to Wimbledon the next day maybe.

Chris's turn to boast, he'd be the best boxer, the best welterweight; even better than Sugar Ray Leonard. He'd box at Madison Square Garden in New York City no less; yes, he'd be on TV for the boxing fans all over the world to see him. He'd also be on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*.

More laughter.

Chris—studiedly—said he'd be more famous than Chen.

But Chen quickly disagreed, and a new round of argument started about which profession made one the most famous, tennis or boxing. From time to time I turned round to look at Kaiso, who still kept to himself.

Chen, Boyo, Chris, they talked, boasted; they were visiting all the countries of the world. Then, finally, as if he couldn't bear it any longer, Kaiso cried out:

"I will remain right here!"

The way he said this, it was as if he was challenging us to say the same.

"You won't even go to the Soviet Union?" asked Boyo, still with a smirk.

"Maybe," came the reply, almost inaudible.

Kaiso's mouth was set firmly, his eyes burning. He rode ahead quickly, as if he wanted to be far away; and maybe—I wondered—he was still thinking of breaking away from us.

Wasn't he?

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I must come with him to the Youth Centre Building of the Party, a dilapidated structure I knew about, but which I hardly ever entered before. From time to time "important" speakers visited it, giving it a

sense of mystery, serious goings-on. People who wanted to change the world.

"I'm not a member," I said to Kaiso.

"You will be." Finality in his voice, manner.

I followed him, walking up the rickety stairs, he moving ahead confidently as if used to doing this.

The hall area was empty, and Kaiso at once moved the chairs around, pulling one chair in front and hauling a table alongside. He fascinated me now.

Next he sat down at the table in front, closed his eyes for a minute, then rose to speak before his imaginary audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen, comrades and friends," he began, "imperialism and colonialism. . . ." His hands chopping the air, his maiden speech begun: his expression rigid, tense. This was something he wanted to do for a long time. He spoke freely, though still tense, captivating his audience. Gesticulating even more; the words literally rolling out from his tongue as he lambasted colonialism and imperialism, calling for socialism to take over. Systems, politics, his rage. Eyes rivetted to his imaginary audience, unrelenting. Yes, he was asking the Soviet Union and Cuba to assist us to run our country.

His eyes gleamed.

I was intrigued even more, yet I wanted to laugh.

When he finished, he sighed hard and asked: "How was I, eh?"

"Not bad."

He pulled up his collar, so he might appear older, suave. "You t'ink I could make this country independent?"

"We're already independent."

"We need real independence, man. The expatriates, they still own everyt'ing."

I was frightened by his tone, the look in his eyes; so deadly serious he was. I nodded, pleasing him.

He grinned. "I mean it, you know."

"Mean what?"

"Dropping out of the gang."

"What for?"

"I don't want to pretend any longer."

"We're not pretendin'."

His face tightened, lips puckered. He moved closer to me, his face a firm, uncompromising grit, so fired up he was.

"This country'll remain like this for a long time," he added.

"What you mean, Kaiso?"

He started explaining, repeating some of the things he said in his speech, "imperialism" and "capitalism" again and again. Then he suggested: "You shoulda read politics, man. It's the thing to do."

I recreated his "speech" in my mind, his hands still chopping the air, words ringing in my ears. Next he was laughing and saying, "See, you believe all that I say, eh? You really believe; you'll no longer be decadent."

We rode out again that evening, and I looked at each of the others critically. Chen still thinking of playing at Wimbledon, a crowd applauding him all the time. Boyo's hair neatly combed, a James Dean; he muttered to me, "That Kaiso, he thinks about politics night an' day. It not hard to tell. He not having fun."

"We should have a purpose in life."

"Like he?"

"We have to save our country."

The others overheard, they were puzzled by me for a while.

Chris added, "Who cares!"

Loudly.

Then he rode off, sprinting ahead, the others taking after him, their whoops, louder: so bizarre, strange, it seemed.

Kaiso, where was he? He hadn't come with us, I didn't notice before.

Suddenly I started thinking of the workers, just as Kaiso had talked about in his latest speech, their exploitation, which had to stop. My own silent determination, throbbing. It was as simple as black and white, and why wasn't everyone else seeing it so clearly. Kaiso's hands chopping the air, berating me with all the details of the workers' plight, their gnarled hands, chapped skin; brutality of their lives: all our relatives, parents.

A week later I joined the study group, just as Kaiso wanted me to. A few heavy volumes were under his thin arms. Where he got them from I didn't know. This was a new side of Kaiso, I was amazed. One volume was about the life of Lenin, his strategy, tactics; Lenin's stern, willful face embossed on the cover, his jutting-out chin, fierce will. Nothing would go wrong under his command.

Kaiso smiled, he was now in a world of his own, I figured.

"We got to control we own destiny, see," he said. "Socialism, scientific socialism"—new terms he bandied about—"is the answer." He shook as he talked, throbbing.

I became afraid as I watched him; though loyalty kept me to him, we were *Los Toros*.

Kaiso started reading whole passages from the volume, repeating Karl Marx's name from time to time, his eyes gleaming. Next he commented on each passage, and asking the rest of us who were present to interpret what he read, to doubt if we dared! I knew right then that when we rode out once more as a gang, it would never be the same again.

With prescience Kaiso said to me: "I know what you're thinking."

"What?"

He flipped through the pages, he looked disappointed in me.

I didn't want him to feel this way; I still wanted us to be close friends. I also wanted to believe what he said, but I was taking a long time to come around to this.

He grimaced, lips quivering.

The next day there were five others at the Party building to join our study group, and Kaiso was happy. He said he was expecting them, it was all planned. Once more he set about reading loudly from the heavy volumes, parts here and there, Lenin's jaw jutting out. I sensed Kaiso trying to imitate Lenin by the way he read, explained, though at times he appeared confused and fumbled his words.

I wanted to laugh just then, but didn't. I only pretended to be deeply interested.

Someone asked, "Is Marxism a dogma?" "No," Kaiso quickly replied, "Just a—"

"Eh?"

"Guide to action."

Kaiso had a quick answer for everything, and he didn't seem laconic any longer. Looking at me, he smiled. Suddenly I wanted the other members of our gang to be here: all to watch him, hear him read and explain things. But I figured too that by our being here, the two of us alone—with these others—we were betraying the gang.

An older man entered, and Kaiso at once said he was the teacher: an invited guest; all along we were expecting him, weren't we? This

"teacher" was supposed to have travelled far and wide, had been to the Soviet Union, most of the Eastern Bloc countries. He'd been to Cuba as well. Eyebrows raised, as we looked closely at him, his beard, narrow face.

When the "teacher" spoke his words were easy, effortless, the phrases coming out of his mouth like butter, all his talk about the American capitalists not wanting the balance of forces in the world to change. He smirked. Just look at Africa, Latin America, the evidence was there. He grew solemn, almost grave. Look at Angola, Nicaragua, *comrades*, the revolutionary forces were fully at work. His eyes darted about; then, alternately, he became solemn once more, not gesticulating as much as Kaiso did.

I kept my eyes rivetted to the heavy volumes; Lenin had predicted it all, it'd happen this way. And Marx, well, it was all rooted in solid socialist theory, didn't we know?

After, Kaiso came to me in a corner and muttered, "What's it now?" "Nothing," I replied.

"We're still a colony, you know," as if he sensed my scepticism.

"What difference it make?"

He ignored this.

That evening we continued our double life with the gang, going around for the usual ride; Kaiso staying far back, or sometimes suddenly riding ahead. We talked, laughed.

Now no one asked about Kaiso, none caring it seemed like, and I was disappointed. I figured Kaiso would much rather be at home reading his large volumes, going through the heavy-sounding phrases with a dictionary. Politics, his life more and more. He rode ahead of us once more. Suddenly I wanted Boyo—he more than anyone else—to talk to Kaiso. He didn't.

Not even Chen, who was often outgoing, enthusiastic. Mohan and Ramesh also, who were like Chen, often laughing, teasing: also kept quiet. Chris pursed his lips as I rode close to him . . . maybe still thinking of being at Madison Square Garden in New York.

Suddenly we were once more in the hinterland with memory, instinct: barking, crying and baying at an invisible moon. Being ourselves, our way, forgetting everything else, other imagined traumas, rage, totally vicarious with laughter. Next a set of cats, the jaguar, jaguarundi, ocelot:

eyes brightly shining orbs, outdoing the moon itself; until we were exhausted.

Kaiso rode closer to me, his handle bar almost touching mine. He sensed my own silence, perplexity. He asked, "You hear them coming?"

"Who coming?"

He laughed, a nervous fear in him. Maybe the others had made him afraid. "The animals," he said after a short while, "they're here."

I stiffened.

Closer to the sugar estate once more, the factory at Rose Hall's incessant throbbing. Yes, he was tense, ready with his best raucous notes close to here where the expatriates lived. But everyone was now absolutely quiet; a strange prescience in the air . . . and Kaiso looked up at the moon above. I inhaled the pungency of rotten sugar cane mixed with mollusc, crab, shrimp from the ocean bordering the coast: though some miles away. Then the stench of manure, cowdung, chicken shit, rotten vegetables; open sewage from latrines; composts of dead leaves, bootleg rum resonant amidst an almost ancient, lingering smell of desiccated insects, reptiles: the night air all, the trade winds wafting more of the iodine of the sea, ocean. And night's darkness, the clouds forming heavily like large bolts of cloth, rolling and unrolling, indecipherable knots.

Blackening . . . As we rode on, faster. Passing the expatriates' houses, like a foreign place. Rain: thick drops falling all of a sudden, coming down in heavy sheets and thrashing fiercely, the ground leaping up as the drops pelted, kicked up veritable clods of earth.

I huddled in a corner, searching out a further cover in the darkness, with thunder rolling. Here: all other sounds, smells, diminished, disappeared. The sky's blackness gashed by the white face of lightning. The hinterland's animals still coming.

Kaiso had become separated from me during the storm, and now I had to find him. An urgency in me, images, fear, all of us in a mild disarray.

I didn't find him.

When the rain abated two hours later, I went straight to the Party Building: and he was there. Again talking, in silence, which seemed odd; nothing personal he wanted to hear. Only the bigger things mattered, chiding he was in his fashion. And rain still kicking up the earth, rivulets, the streets overrun.

Kaiso began to speak more easily. "I got to learn to speak well, to enunciate clearly. Make sure I know enough statistics. It always important to quote figures, arithmetic, yes." Talking to himself only, I figured. He added: "The opposition—"

"Opposition?"

He didn't bother to explain. He carried on, "That's how it got to be. That's what the teacher says. Remember he? He's experienced, like Lenin. Strategy and tactics." A smile, like a flutter, flitted across his narrow mouth; this imminence and expectation of Parliament in him, where he wanted to be no doubt. Which he sustained, a solid image: eyes burned, the way he kept looking at me. But I was thinking of the gang: Chen in Wimbledon, actually there. The others' hopes, dreams. All aspirations of one sort or another. The raindrops' *plop-plop-plop*, like tennis balls hitting against the boards. I pulled my collar closer to my neck, just as Kaiso had done before: and imagined playing tennis also, then cricket, a real pro as I was—a maverick in my own right.

I expected Kaiso to start laughing.

He didn't.

"How do I look eh?" I pressed him, a gesture of parody.

He grimaced.

I pulled the collar higher, closer.

All of a sudden he laughed, and I also laughed. His turn to pull up his collar, to ask "How do I look?" Kaiso was his old self again.

"Like a gangster," I replied.

"Not like a Prime Minister?"

When I shook my head negatively, he pursed his lips, face crimsoning: he was angry.

He walked out, slim body shooting through the door and down the rickety stairs of the building, feet stamping hard.

I shouted after him, "You wastin' yuh time, Kaiso. What's the matter with you? You're not the same any more!"

But he was gone into the darkness . . . that fleeting moment. I felt then I might never see him again; which filled me with a strange awe. Foreboding. And more and more everything in the world seemed fleeting, was pulled away from under my feet. I stood at the door of the building, looking out. And maybe the heavy rain had started again, pounding,

thrashing; the lightning of our inner lives, the thunder of hearts; brain cells' assault.

Kaiso forever gone, the gang falling apart. Boyo, Chen, Allim, all the others, huddling in their individual corners, soaking wet, but also laughing in a bizarre fashion. Yes, who were we, where were we going?

Boyo's laughter resounding, loudest.

I put my fingers to my ears, even as I looked beyond the street in the pitch-blackness. A palpable omen, something about to happen, far beyond us. Something indeed, the more I watched, felt the rain.

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The newspapers blared it out, and we'd been expecting it, weren't we? An invasion now, as if right after the heavy downpour of rain. Yet this dark pulse of voices, whispers, people huddled together at their radios—the few that existed. And yes, they said, political turmoil and racial violence were overtaking parts of the country; the threat of Communism everywhere. Soldiers from England, the Coldstream Guards no less, the same ones who guarded the Queen's Palace in London, they were here! Then, another rumor, the British soldiers were also US marines. Transformed more horrid looks, each other's faces. Now our gang would disappear, we were literally under seige: no one would be able to go out any more in daylight or nighttime; we couldn't give rein to our fantasies: hinterland or coastland voices stifled, subdued; under fierce check. Yes, the whole of Guyana, the Caribbean, Central and South America . . . was under seige!

And where was Kaiso now? I kept asking, thinking about him: he, busier than usual it seemed. He was either planning or attending some meeting or the other, all clandestine.

I felt left out just when I wanted to get involved; I wanted to follow him around, mainly because I figured I'd disappointed him before. And more newspaper headlines; the radio blared out the invasion louder, clearer . . . and it was happening because this *thing* had to be stopped. Communism, yes: it was the scourge of nations, it crept in every corner of the land corrupting the youth, adults. The British and Americans had to do something about it . . . They came here to stamp it out. And I

thought of the "teacher" at once, that one: his cool tone, he'd hinted at an invasion.

Fear gripped me.

A knock on my door, our house shaking, the beams quivering in broad daylight. Or was it night?

I slowly opened the door.

It was Kaiso. And I was glad he came. He looked agitated, expression florid. He said he simply came to invite me to a special meeting: he came himself to tell me about it. He seemed more impatient, he didn't look me in the eyes. Yes, I was also a freedom fighter! He tapped me on the shoulder, then said he had to go, just when I didn't want him to. "You must come," he encouraged. "We got no choice. Our country's under attack." Urgency in his manner, finality.

"But Kaiso . . ." I began.

He put a finger to my lips, his lips, indicating further secrecy. More would be said later, tonight, at the meeting. And suddenly I thought of his last speech as "prime minister," collar pulled up, looking like Humphrey Bogart. I wanted to tell him this now; but he was gone.

Now I longed for our entire gang to be together: to hear Boyo's wild laughter, his carefree attitude; Chen talking about Wimbledon and tennis balls cracking against the court as the racket fired, slapped, banged in passionate, frenzied play. The evening air, balmy. Greetings from passers-by: the "fame" we'd cultivated, which grew with me as I put on my red shirt and contemplated the bull embossed on the pocket; my dark slacks . . . thinking again about the color of my shirt, red signifying belief, politics.

Did it?

I took my time to get there, nervous as I was, looking left and right. Climbing the stairs, slowly. Was I late? Who else would be there? No sound, no one else; not even a light bustle. Maybe the entire gang would be here. Chen, Boyo, fear in their eyes also, so subdued everyone was: Kaiso had gotten us all together. And there were others too, faces I hadn't seen before. That "teacher," him.

I entered, and looked left and right. Books on the front table, all new volumes, Lenin's face, prominent. Kaiso smiled, pleased. No one else; they were silent. The books' familiar-unfamiliar smell about them, a presence their own.

Kaiso began talking about the Soviet Union, Cuba, other far-off places, the Eastern Bloc. We'd all go there if we wanted, he suggested. Odd his voice, tone; he'd gotten it from a good source. His voice rose, tense . . . Yes, we could still be free, we didn't have to remain here under the seige brought on by the Americans and British. He laughed nervously . . . unlike himself, his face's pantomime, mouth twisting awry, teeth spilled over . . . lips curving. Yes, some of us could also go deep into the hinterland, and remain there for a while. Plan a guerrilla attack!

I rubbed my eyes, and looked again at the others fidgeting, Boyo more nervous than anyone else.

I felt the bull on my shirt pocket, touching it; looking around.

Kaiso also looked around.

Suddenly the door burst open. Soldiers with bayonets sticking out swarmed in, about six of them—though it seemed like a hundred. Tall, heavily built, each grimfaced—as if from another planet.

More nervousness, shock.

I stole a glance at Kaiso, and—oddly—he seemed pleased; a dim smile on his mouth.

The soldiers glared at the heavy volumes on the table, intrigued. Each book now a personality of its own, dumbfounding. Amusing. My thoughts raced.

One soldier close to me growled, face twitching, blonde hair bristling. And maybe he too was nervous, he looked at each of us: at me, only. Another picked up one of the volumes with Lenin's face on the cover, slowly turning the pages. Then he looked at us, each one, intensely. Then me, my red shirt (no one else was wearing his). And once more eyes focussed on Lenin. Next, he looked long at the embossed bull. . . . Who was I? Kaiso was also looking at me, though this time he didn't smile: he appeared unlike a *toro*. A strange taste came into my mouth. And it was only me—*el toro!* Not Boyo, Chen, Allim—or any of the others!

Kaiso? Silently, mutely, I called out his name. But he was fading into the background, and the soldiers' eyes still bore holes into me, the bayonets piercing through my body, the bull itself, oddly, gored. Blood spilled out.

Laughter all of a sudden, loud, clear; everyone was laughing. What was happening? Were they laughing at me? All the soldiers, faces widening, expanding like rubber. Boyo was laughing harder: at me, us?

Kaiso, he was the only one who wasn't laughing. His face crimsoned. Just then he started rushing out of the room, pulling his collar to his neck, the gangster that he looked, a real Humphrey Bogart! And Boyo and the others were pointing at him, laughing harder.

I knew right then it was the end of our gang, the end of *Los Toros*; the end too of our wanting to be part of everyone else on the continent. We'd all go our separate ways, travelling to England, America, Canada. Kaiso would go to the Soviet Union or Cuba, some place different from us. Chen's eyes glinting, a tennis racket in his hand, swinging it, so very pleased.

One soldier picked up a volume, gripping it.

I retreated, thinking just then of animals we often imitated, coastland and hinterland cries locked in my throat; then a whole set of birds, my imitating them louder. And how I wanted the sounds to go after Kaiso, our collective cries—to stop him! But he, the gangster, was running away, faster, his collar pulled higher, covering most of his face: the back of his head, like a hood.

Another soldier chatted with Boyo and Chen, suddenly curious about them, exchanging stories. Boyo laughed harder; and maybe he was boasting about his many dates, the James Dean he was. Just like Boyo to do, I muttered to myself. Chen, too, talking about Wimbledon, beaming. Next, Allim's turn, asking all sorts of questions about America, England, he always wanted to go there; or, maybe it was just to New York City where he'd see Chris the boxer, Madison Square Garden.

How I wanted to be with them; yet I didn't. I wanted to run after Kaiso, to know him better; he who'd remain right here, his destiny, as much as it was mine: to keep tagging behind him in a sense, for a while—so concerned I was about his fate.

But I stood my ground, the laughter swirling, Boyo, Chen, Chris, and the other members of the gang, like outsiders; the bull yet emblazoning on my shirt. One soldier with a freckled face watched me longest. Sounds, shriller than ever, the various animals in my head: I felt dizzy.

Rain pelting down, despite the sunshine. Resounding in our steps as we started going down the rickety stairs leading to the main door. The walls, streets, echoing; the seige itself, like a travesty. And . . . outside, I saw headlights blaring; that girl, from somewhere, hair streaming; and pointing and laughing at me—or was it Boyo?—seemed all.