

## Spears and Promises

Robert Hart

Leaving Dublin was my graduation from childhood. The pain of the abrupt and premature end to my college freshman year had blinded me to all thoughts of return and stripped away—I thought forever—the courage to relive the haunting memories. Now, 50 years later, my publisher confronted me with a packet of letters and the photographs from Bikono's daughter.

I had not known he had a daughter.

She had a simple request; she wanted me to write about her father. To do this I must face the past. In the fall of 2007 I returned to Dublin for a rite of passage that had been deferred too long.

I rode the bus from the airport into the heart of the city, walked from the bus station to the river Liffey and followed it to O'Connell Street. This was not the Dublin I remembered. The changes startled me. People swirled on the sidewalks, streams of color that rippled and eddied into the road, contesting the space between the cars, taxis and buses.

I crossed the bridge over the river, walked past the open gateway of my alma mater, Trinity College, and thrust through the crowds to Grafton Street, now paved with blocks and transformed into a pedestrian precinct. Switzers, the basement coffee shop of my long ago student days, had been swallowed by the change. I couldn't even place where it had stood.

The perspective had changed. Distances teased distorted memories. Familiarity in a barely recognizable world, a dissonance between past and present, conjured alarming feelings that the memories showed the wrong scene. Would other memories be as fallible?

St. Stephen's Green at the far end of Grafton Street, the fifty acre park a lush, stable oasis so close to the city center, separated the pedestrian precinct from the street where I once lived. Across from the south-west corner of the park, Harcourt Street curved into the distance, many of the once familiar rooming houses now corporate offices. From across the street my former dwelling appeared so ordinary, the once inviting entrance smaller, the steps not so high, the door not so far back. The nameplate had gone. But the railings, the awful railings were still there.

Fifty years was a lifetime.

I crossed the road, forced myself to look at the door, the pavement, and up at the window. Then I grasped the railings.

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Late on a bleak September afternoon in 1957, because my parents lived in East Africa, the clerk in the University housing office classified me as a *colonial student* and directed me to a four story rooming house squeezed into the middle of a row of Georgian town houses. Its once understated elegance had faded; its streaked brickwork testament to two centuries of city grime. A semi-circular fanlight crowned the paneled front door.

At first sight the terrace appeared to be sunk in the ground, the façade broken at intervals by steep flights of steps rising to each front door set half a floor above the roadway. Beside the steps, spiked railings guarded the entranceways to each basement, their heads like flattened spear-blades pointing skyward, their hafts sunk in the concrete sidewalk.

Carrying my battered suitcase, I pushed through the unlocked front door both excited and apprehensive. I found the office as the secretary made ready to leave. She paused, her coat half on and opened a folder on her desk.

“Let me see,” she said. “You must be Andrew Sinclair-Smith. You will be sharing with Michael Evans, room three, second floor.” She passed across the folder. “All the rules are in there. Now, here’s the front door key—we lock up at nine—and room key....,” she paused and the briefest of smiles flashed across her face. “That’s it. I must go.”

The house, the terrace and the street all dated from the 1800s. Michael acted as a rapid tour guide, jumbling each room with the others—bathrooms, game room, the public telephone hidden under the narrow staircase. The rooms had long ago forgotten their prime years.

“Dining room is in the basement,” Michael said, and then he led me to the library and the lounge which occupied the entire floor one flight up. “You’re from Africa, right? You should love it here.” He opened the lounge door.

My face must have betrayed my shock at the first sight of my fellow students. Figures loomed through a haze of smoke, some in chairs reading, two poring over a chess board. Something looked wrong. Everyone appeared so old.

A dark skinned man rose from a deep armchair, walked over and extended his hand. Half a head shorter than Michael, himself quite short, he smiled up at us both. He was dressed in a business suit.

“Welcome to Koinonia House. I am Hassan.”

“You are a student?” I asked.

“I am from Ceylon.”

“These people look older...”

“Of course. Most here—well, except for Michael—are postgraduate students either studying for higher degrees, or in the case of doctors, preparing for their board examinations.”

“Where are they from?”

“We are all colonial students,” said Hassan. “British colonial. French colonial. Portuguese colonial. Michael here is also accepted as a colonial though he is from Wales. The authorities may have thought that was a British colonial possession.”

Later I confided in Michael that I had not expected to be one of only two white students, both undergraduates, when at that time the only black graduate I had met had been a zoologist teaching in a mission school.

“What were you doing in a mission school?” asked Michael.

“He, the black fellow, had arranged a debate between our schools when I was a senior.”

“That must have been only last year?”

I nodded. “I led our team. It was the first meeting allowed between the two schools.”

“How did it go?”

“Most of our time we spent trying not to offend each other, but really I think no one wanted word of our meeting to upset the white parents in South Africa. Their fees kept our school alive.”

“How did you get on with the African pupils?”

“We weren’t allowed to fraternize with them.”

“Hmm. So you met this teacher only once?”

“We nearly met a second time. He was asked to examine me in biology for a London university entrance exam, but the authorities wouldn’t accept his credentials. They claimed he was inexperienced, so I was examined at Wits University in Jo’burg. But I think the idea of a black examiner came too soon after the debate.”

“Now, only a year later, you are about to live with a group of black post-graduates, with years of study and experience. What a giggle.”

“A giggle? Damn, you don’t understand.”

“With higher degrees possibly than any teacher you ever met.” He grinned and slapped me on the back.

The first few weeks formed a strange adjustment period. Much as Trinity College, founded by Elizabeth I, was considered an island of Protestantism in an Irish sea of Catholicism, I drifted, a pale alien, in uncharted dark seas.

Shortly after midterm, Michael decided to take rooms on campus and the warden informed me that Ifi Bikono would be taking his place. I would now share living quarters with a black man.

Ifi Bikono was a physician.

"You must be Sinclair-Smith," he said when we met, extending his hand. Without conscious thought I grasped his right hand, holding my right wrist with my left hand. Bikono responded in kind. "Hassan here has offered to help me move. I have many books."

Bikono was tall. I could imagine him barefoot, in dusty robes, leaning on a spear and gazing across the desert through hooded eyes, although it was difficult—his dark pinstripe defined him as a professional man. He carried a gold pocket watch with the chain looped on a vest button and wore slim soft black shoes, like dancing shoes. He had the smallest feet of any black man I had ever seen.

But his hands! Doctors should have small hands, fine hands, with tapering fingers; especially Bikono, to match his long frame and tapered head that could have modeled for Modigliani. But his hands were large, the fingers square, spatulate, practical. The skin was wrinkled into ridges as if the substance beneath had been sucked out leaving sterile freeze-dried fingers that need only to be immersed in water to swell and smooth and fill his soft latex doctor's gloves. Once I saw him piecing together the shards of a broken vase, and marveled at his dexterity. For all their size they were exquisite instruments of touch.

His curiosity, however, he wielded as an instrument of challenge. He had barely taken charge of his half of the wardrobe and dresser when he sat on the bed and stared at me in silence for several moments. Hassan busied himself sorting the books.

"So," he said. "You too, are a colonial student?"

"Yes. Nyasaland."

Bikono nodded thoughtfully. "East Africa. Ah. That is why you used an African handshake."

"I thought..."

"In this country you really have no need. Some of we *Colonials* are quite Europeanized."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"That's all right. I am impressed that you observe African customs. You were born there?"

"Er, no. I was born in England. In a small village in Rutland County. We—my parents—emigrated after the war. To Tanganyika."

“Emigrated?” His eyebrows shot up and he leaned forward as if awaiting further explanation.

“Well, we moved there,” I said.

“Most European civil servants did tours of duty for their government. Two weeks local leave a year and six months home leave every three years. Even missionaries. Very few emigrated. But the warden said you were from South Africa. I thought you might be an Afrikaner.”

“I am British.”

“Good, I think. So in a way, am I. By heritage, French, but by education, British.”

“I didn’t mean to imply...”

“You are uncomfortable. I can see that. I was worried too when the warden asked me if I would mind sharing with you.”

“He asked?”

“He too is aware we might have ... sensibilities. That is not the right word.”

“Sensibilities.”

“Quite. Thank you. Well, it seems we must share this room, at least for tonight. We should stop looking at each other like strange dogs, and start over. Perhaps get to know each other a little.”

“Yes,” I said, struggling to think of how to make conversation. “What part of Africa are you from?”

“The west. Just below the big bulge. Well, inland a bit. My family are farmers.”

“What are you doing in Dublin?”

“I am here for my Fellowship exams. As are most of us in this house. And you?”

“Literature.”

“So, how did you like my country?”

I hesitated. He sounded as if he regarded me as a stranger in his land. This might be difficult. “My country, too,” I said.

“Ah, yes. You emigrated.”

“My father worked for the Tanganyika railways.”

“But you said you were from Nyasaland.”

“That was later. He moved to a large construction company. Roads and dams and things.”

“And that’s where you went to school? Or were you sent home, to England?”

“I went to school in Swaziland.”

“My, my, you are well travelled. And your parents, they are still there?”

“Yes.”

“They did not go back to—where did you say—Rutland?”

I shook my head. “It’s England’s smallest county, about 152 square miles.”

“What would that be in acres? You have been at school more recently.”

“One hundred and fifty-two times 640.” I calculated the answer with a scribble on the back of my welcoming folder. “Ninety-seven thousand.”

“Ah. About 100,000 acres. A little smaller than my father’s farm.”

“What?”

“As befits a tribal chief.”

“For the time being you will be sharing this room,” Hassan said. “May I suggest some rules? For every lesser insult put an extra shilling in the electric meter.”

Bikono and I grinned sheepishly at each other.

“For bigger fights,” Hassan continued, “I must be called to referee. Now I suggest we go down to dinner.”

We descended to the basement in silence.