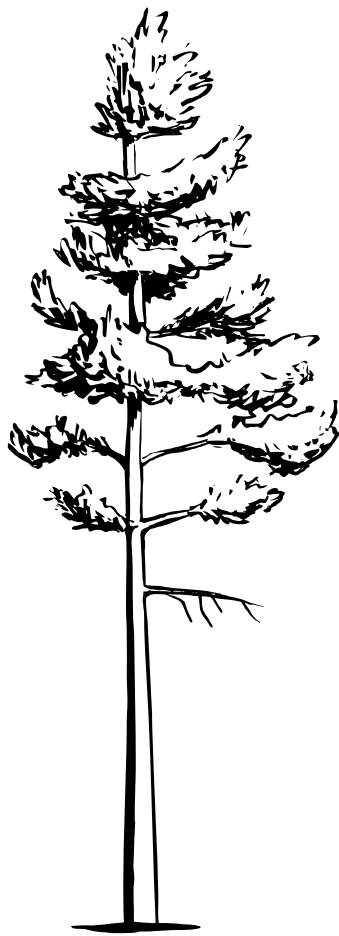


# The Sage and The Pines



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In the half-light of the afternoon haze, the intruders stand tall. My eyes dart across the forest scape, and I am met with them every time. Some enclose the two-tyre-track ahead of me; others are seen on the rolling hills in the distance: Pine trees. Their abundance is overwhelming. I float on with the thrum of the bakkie, not thinking, listening to the cry of the cicadas and catching glimpses of the dartwings dashing below the pines.

Firmly rooted.

Beneath their nimble trunks, I recognise a herb I am quite acquainted with: African sage. Unassuming, yet abundant. It is then that I realise that I am quick to point out the pine over the imphepho. It is then that I realise that I am no longer in the bushveld but a pineland. It is then that I realise that my South Africa is no longer mine, to begin with. Yet traces of me have been deeply rooted in the land in the form of intruders.

The bakkie thrums have faded into monotony. I enter through the alcove of the pines to more open land. To my right, the remnants of old farmhouses remain in their stone fireplaces. A little while onwards, the

wooden house with the blue door sits solemnly on the side of the track. The Imphepho Man has heard the thrum for miles on end as he has emerged from his cabin, awaiting my intrusion. He is shirtless, and his ragged jeans hang dutifully off his hips. Previously, wandering off the beaten track led me to our initial meeting. Then, my presence had brought him an inscrutable countenance. This time, he seems cordial, yet perhaps my arrival has interrupted the limbo of his solace. The words that emerge from his lips are ones that immediately point to a deemed position of subordination:

“Meneer.” (Sir.)

“Hoe gaan dit Meneer?” (How is it going, Sir?)

“Dit is lekker om Meneer weer to sien.” (It is lovely to see you again, Sir.)

He is a textbook South African coloured: half-black, half-white, living a life of subsistence farming on white-man’s-land. He speaks the language of the oppressor but with a clang of concupiscent enunciation, distinctive of the coloured dialect. He must be in his sixties, heavysset, yet with the eyes of a caracal, ones that dart yet looks through you.

I am appropriately invited onto his property—an accolade. Flea-borne puppies dodder around the man like an extended tail. Behind his cabin, his property extends, housing a makeshift greenhouse and a vegetable patch battling against the aridity—the pigsty huddles in the corner, his most treasured possession. Five emaciated pigs thrive in squalor within a five-metre space.

He tells me that he sells them off to the men who come to work on the timber, and with that, the money he gains sends him on an hour's walk off of the farm; to the N2 highway, where a thumb will propel him into humanity – for a brief moment. It is there that he will pick up a few human conveniences that are deemed necessary for his survival: gas, firelighters, nails, duct tape, cooking oil, sugar, salt and pepper. Well. I'll be damned. Damned if he did and damned if he didn't. Without pigs, he'd surely be damned.

I offer him a smoke.

“Baie dankie, Meneer.” (Thank you very much, Sir.)

It is then that I discover the fragments of his personal odyssey. He grew up in a nearby shanty town during Apartheid. In the 80s, he worked as a petty labourer. He painted walls, washed windows, and weeded gardens, all with his dompas (dumb pass) in his pocket. Many details should be included in his story as he walks through the vegetable patch. Instead, we walk amongst the weeds. He tells me that he has been here for about eleven years, seven out of those eleven working on the timber plantations. Through a seeming trick of fate, he has been granted the lifelong right to live on the property.

“Die Meester het my hier laat bly.” (The Master let me stay here.)

So, he resides symbiotically amongst the pines, seeking refuge in those who refuted him.

That imminent thought appears: is there cannabis here?

“Ja, Meneer.” (Yes, Sir.)

He climbs deeper within the patch to the corner with the most overgrowth. The cannabis plants are barely visible.

“Ek gebruik dit as medisyne.” (I use it as medicine.)

“Die kinders sit dit in brownies. Ek het dit op televisie gesien.” (The kids put it in brownies. I saw it on the television.)

He does not own a television.

I feel the urge to praise him for his crop yield, however pathetic it may be.

“Wil Meneer ‘n pampoen hê?” (Do you want a pumpkin, Sir?)

Whilst he is crouching and hacking away with a blunt pocket knife, I am prodded by an inkling. I look down at my leather shoes and the tracks it has formed in the arid soil. The imprints are far scattered from the entrance -halted- passed the pig pen – halted - to the vegetable patch - halted. With every step and with every print, the footprint of the Imphepho Man is trampled over—every step trampling upon an imposed diaspora.

“You don’t have enough water for your vegetables,” I tell him. “How do you water them?”

“Ek gebruik 'n slangpyp, Meneer.” (I use a hosepipe, Sir.)

I shift the weight between my two feet as I roll my tongue over my teeth. His caracal eyes manage to miss my gaze, looking through me rather than at me, yet still piercing me. As he holds the pumpkin in his arms, he looks as if he is lodged in the ground and unable to move even if he wants to. I know this is a reality, as the Imphepho Man does not have anywhere else to go, even if he would like to. Apartheid estranged him from his family and his people, and now he has to live on these desolate plantations, on the white man's land. I think he must be a little insane, living out here in solitude for all these years. But perhaps solitude is better than knowing about your subordination. Out here, there is no man to compare yourself to.

“I could set up a water tank for you the next time I come here.” I say.

His face lights up for a brief moment, but it is short-lived. I can sense that he does not want to feel indebted to anyone, especially since he does not have much to give other than a pumpkin and a damned pig.

“No need to repay me. I'll do it for free.”

Rest assured—a subtle sigh of relief. We finish our cigarettes as the final light of day breaches the sky, flicking ash into the soil and weeds, as there is not much left to be said.



He loads the pumpkin in the back of my bakkie with a sense of duty. I reach out to shake his hand, and he is almost taken aback. Then, with slight hesitation, his hand touches mine, feeling callused and dry but warm to the touch, and for a brief moment, his pride is lifted from the arid soil.

“I’ll come back soon to set up the tank.”

“Baie baie dankie, Meneer. Totsiens en lekker aand vir jou.” (Thank you very very much, Sir. Goodbye and have a good evening.)

Car door closes- halted. Key in the ignition - halted. A quick glance out the window - halted. Pull-away.

The Imphepho Man stands lodged in the ground as the bakkie drives off down the two-tyre track, watching the last glimpse of the white man disappear out of sight. I should feel lifted, yet I am met with feelings of guilt. I know what I have done, and it irks



me to the core. Without intention, I have intruded upon his homestead and colonised his space.

Making him out to be something charitable is just what I did. Like the pine tree that towers above the imphepho, I colonised his space.

The African sage sits in bundles on the side of the track. I am met with a compulsion; to pick the sage from the side of the road and swiftly place it in the car with me. As I drive past the towering pines, where the cicadas cry and the dartwings dash, I allow a piece of the Imphepho man to travel along with me, allowing a piece of the Imphepho Man to tread with me over an imposed diaspora.