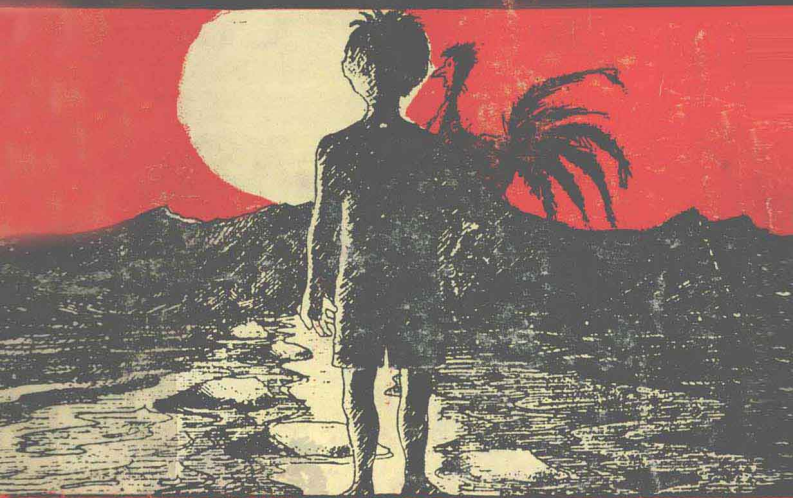


THE POWER OF ONE



BRYCE COURTENAY

'QUITE SIMPLY IT'S PURE MAGIC'

BARBARA TAYLOR BRADFORD

BRYCE COURTENAY

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OF ONE**

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For Maude Jasmine Greer and Enda Murphy.
Here is the book I promised you so long ago.

ONE

This is what happened.

Before my life started properly, I was doing the usual mewling and sucking, which in my case occurred on a pair of huge, soft black breasts. In the African tradition I continued to suckle for my first two and a half years after which my Zulu wet nurse became my nanny. She was a person made for laughter, warmth and softness and she would clasp me to her breasts and stroke my golden curls with a hand so large it seemed to contain my whole head. My hurts were soothed with a song about a brave young warrior hunting a lion and a women's song about doing the washing down on the big rock beside the river where, at sunset, the baboons would come out of the hills to drink.

My life proper started at the age of five when my mother had her nervous breakdown. I was torn from my lovely black nanny with her big white smile and sent to boarding school.

Then began a time of yellow wedges of pumpkin, burnt black and bitter at the edges; mashed potato with glassy lumps; meat aproned with gristle in grey gravy; diced carrots; warm, wet, flatulent cabbage; beds that wet themselves in the morning; and an entirely new sensation called loneliness.

I was the youngest child in the school by two years, and I spoke only English, the infected tongue that had spread like a plague into the sacred land and contaminated the pure, sweet waters of Afrikanerdom.

The Boer War had created a great malevolence for the

English, for the *Rooineks*. It was a hate that had entered their bloodstream and pocked the hearts and minds of the next generation. To their barefoot sons, I was the first live example of the congenital hate they carried for my kind.

I spoke the language which had pronounced the sentences that had killed their grandfathers and sent their grandmothers to the world's first concentration camps, where they died like flies from dysentery, malaria and black water fever. To the bitter Calvinist farmers, the sins of the fathers had been visited upon the sons, unto the third generation. I was infected.

I had had no previous warning that I was wicked and it came as a fearful surprise. I was blubbing to myself in the little kids' dormitory when suddenly I was dragged from under my horrid camphor-smelling blanket by two eleven-year-olds and taken to the seniors' dormitory, to stand trial before the council of war.

My trial, of course, was a travesty of justice. But then what could I expect? I had been caught deep behind enemy lines and everyone, even a five-year-old, knows this means the death sentence. I stood gibbering, unable to understand the language of the stentorian twelve-year-old judge, or the reason for the hilarity when sentence was passed. But I guessed the worst.

I wasn't quite sure what death was. I knew it was something that happened on the farm in the slaughter house to pigs and goats and an occasional heifer. The squeal from the pigs was so awful that I knew it wasn't much of an experience, even for pigs.

And I knew something else for sure; death wasn't as good as life. Now death was about to happen to me before I could really get the hang of life. Trying hard to hold back my tears, I was dragged off.

It must have been a full moon that night because the shower room was bathed in blue light. The stark granite walls of the shower recesses stood sharply angled against the wet cement floor. I had never been in a shower room

before and this place resembled the slaughter house on the farm. It even smelt the same, of urine and blue carbolic soap, so I guessed this was where my death would take place.

My eyes were a bit swollen from crying but I could see where the meat hooks were supposed to hang. Each granite slab had a pipe protruding from the wall behind it with a knob on the end. They would suspend me from one of these and I would be dead, just like the pigs.

I was told to remove my pyjamas and to kneel inside the shower recess facing the wall. I looked directly down into the hole in the floor where all the blood would drain away.

I closed my eyes and said a silent, sobbing prayer. My prayer wasn't to God, but to my nanny. It seemed the more urgent thing to do. When she couldn't solve a problem for me she'd say, 'We must ask Inkosi-Inkosikazi, the great medicine man, he will know what to do.' Although we never actually called on the services of the great man it didn't seem to matter, it was comforting to know he was available when needed.

But it was too late to get a message through to Nanny, much less have her pass it on. I felt a sudden splash on my neck and then warm blood trickled over my trembling, naked body across the cold cement floor and into the drain. Funny, I didn't feel dead. But there you go. Who knows what dead feels like?

When the Judge and his council of war had all pissed on me, they left. After a while it got very quiet, just a drip, drip, drip from someplace overhead and a sniff from me that sounded as though it came from somewhere else.

As I had never seen a shower I didn't know how to turn one on and so had no way of washing myself. I had always been bathed by my nanny in a tin tub in front of the kitchen stove. I'd stand up and she'd soap me all over and Dee and Dum, the two kitchen maids who were twins, would giggle behind their hands when she soaped my little acorn. Sometimes it would just stand right up on its own and everyone

would have an extra good giggle. That's how I knew it was special. just how special I was soon to find out.

I tried to dry myself with my pyjamas, which were wet in patches from lying on the floor, and then I put them back on. I didn't bother to do up the buttons because my hands were shaking a lot. I wandered around that big dark place until I found the small kids' dormitory. There I crept under my blanket and came to the end of my first day in life.

I am unable to report that the second day of my life was much better than the first. Things started to go wrong from the moment I awoke. Kids surrounded my bed holding their noses and making loud groaning sounds. Let me tell you something, there was plenty to groan about. I smelt worse than a kaffir toilet, worse than the pigs at home. Worse even than both put together.

The kids scattered as a very large person with a smudge of dark hair above her lip entered. It was the same lady who had left me in the dormitory the previous evening. 'Good morning, Mevrou!' the kids chorused, each standing stiffly to attention at the foot of his bed.

The large person called Mevrou glared at me. 'Kom,' she said in a fierce voice. Grabbing me by the ear she twisted me out of the stinking bed and led me back to the slaughter house. With her free hand she removed my unbuttoned pyjama jacket and pulled my pants down to my ankles. 'Step,' she barked.

I thought desperately, she's even bigger than Nanny. If she pisses on me I will surely drown. I stepped out of my pyjama pants, and releasing my ear she pushed me into the shower recess. There was a sudden hissing sound and needles of icy water drilled into me.

If you've never had a shower or even an unexpected icy-cold drenching, it's not too hard to believe that maybe this is death. I had my eyes tightly shut but the hail of water was remorseless, a thousand pricks at a time drilling into my skin. How could so much piss possibly come out of one person?

Death was cold as ice. Hell was supposed to be fire and brimstone and here I was freezing to death. It was very frightening, but like so much lately, quite the opposite to what I had been led to expect.

'When you go to boarding school you'll sleep in a big room with lots of little friends so you won't be afraid of the dark anymore.' How exciting it had all sounded.

The fierce hissing noise and the deluge of icy piss stopped suddenly. I opened my eyes to find no Mevrouw. Instead, the Judge stood before me, his pyjama sleeve rolled up, his arm wet where he'd reached in to turn off the shower. Behind him stood the jury and all the smaller kids from my dormitory.

As the water cleared from my eyes I tried to smile gratefully. The Judge's wet arm shot out; grabbing me by the wrist he jerked me out of the granite recess. The jury formed a ring around me as I stood frightened, my hands cupped over my scrotum. My teeth chattering out of control, a weird, glassy syncopation inside my head. The Judge reached out again, and taking both my wrists in one large hand he pulled my hands away and pointed to my tiny acorn. 'Why you piss your bed, Rooinek?' he asked.

'Hey, look there is no hat on his snake!' someone yelled. They all crowded closer, delighted at this monstrous find.

'Pisskop! Pisskop!' one of the smaller kids shouted and in a moment all the small kids were chanting it.

'You hear, you a pisshead,' the Judge translated. 'Who cut the hat off your snake, Pisskop?'

I looked down to where he was pointing, my teeth changing into a quieter timpani. All looked perfectly normal to me, although the tip was a bright blue colour and had almost disappeared into its neat round collar of skin. I looked up at the Judge, confused.

The Judge dropped my arms and using both his hands parted his pyjama fly. His 'snake', monstrously large, hung level with my eyes and seemed to be made of a continuous sheath brought down to a point of ragged skin. A few stray

hairs grew at its base and, I must say, it wasn't much of a sight.

More serious trouble lay ahead of me for sure. I was a Rooinek and a pisskop. I spoke the wrong language. And now I was obviously made differently. But I was still alive, and in my book: where there's life, there's hope.

By the end of the first term I had reduced my persecution time to no more than an hour a day. I had the art of survival almost down pat. Except for one thing: I had become a chronic bed wetter.

It is impossible to be a perfect adapter if you leave a wet patch behind you every morning. My day would begin with a bed-wetting caning from Mevrouw, after which I would make the tedious journey alone to the showers to wash my rubber sheet. When the blue carbolic soap was rubbed against the stiff cane bristles of the large wooden scrubbing brush I was made to use, fiercely stinging specks of soap would shoot up into my eyes. But I soon worked out that you didn't need the soap like Mevrouw said, you could give the sheet a good go under the shower and it would be okay.

My morning routine did serve a useful purpose. I learned that crying is a luxury good adapters have to forgo. I soon had the school record for being thrashed. The Judge said so. It was the first time in my life that I owned something that wasn't a positive disadvantage to adaptation. I wasn't just a hated Rooinek and a pisskop, I was also a record holder. I can tell you it felt good.

The Judge ordered that I only be beaten up a little at a time. A punch here, a flat-hander there, and if I could stop being a pisskop he'd stop even that, although he added that, for a Rooinek, this was probably impossible. I must confess, I was inclined to agree. No amount of resolve on my part or saying prayers to Nanny or even to God seemed to have the least effect.

Maybe it had something to do with my defective acorn? I forced a hole in the side pockets of my shorts through

which my forefinger and thumb would fit. I took secretly to pulling my foreskin and holding it over the tip of my acorn as long as I could in the hope that it would lose elasticity and render me normal. Alas, except for a sore acorn, nothing happened. I was doomed to be a pisshead for the rest of my life.

The end of the first term finally came. I was to return home for the May holidays: home to Nanny who would listen to my sadness and sleep on her mat at the foot of my bed so the bogey man couldn't get me. I also intended to enquire whether my mother had stopped breaking down so I would be allowed to stay home.

I rode home joyfully in the dicky-seat of Dr 'Henny' Boshoff's shiny new Chevrolet coupé. Dr Henny was a local hero who played fly-half for the Northern Transvaal rugby team. When the Judge saw who had come to pick me up, he shook me by the hand and promised things would be better next term.

It was Dr Henny who had first told me about the nervous breakdown, and he now confirmed that my mother was 'coming along nicely' but her nervous breakdown was still with her and she wouldn't be home just yet.

Sadly this put the kibosh on my chances of staying home and never leaving again until I was as old as my granpa, maybe not even then.

As we choofed along in the car, with me in the dicky-seat open to the wind and the sunshine, I was no longer a Rooinek and a pisskop but became a great chief. We passed through African villages where squawking chickens, pumping wings desperately, fled out of the way and yapping kaffir dogs, all ribs and snout and brindle markings, gave chase. Although only after my speeding throne had safely passed. As a great chief I was naturally above such common goings-on. Life was good. I can tell you for certain, life was very good.

Nanny wept tears that ran down her cheeks and splashed onto her huge, warm breasts. She kept rubbing her large,

dark hand over my shaven head, moaning and groaning as she held me close. I had expected to do all the crying when I got home but there was no competing with her.

It was late summer. The days were filled with song as the field women picked cotton, working their way down the long rows, chatting and singing in perfect harmony while they plucked the fluffy white fibre heads from the sun-blackened cotton bolls.

Nanny sent a message to Inkosi-Inkosikazi to the effect that we urgently needed to see him on the matter of the child's night water. The message was put on the drums and in two days we heard that the great medicine man would call in a fortnight or so on his way to visit Modjadji, the great rain queen.

The whites of Nanny's eyes would grow big and her cheeks puff out as she talked about the greatness of Inkosi-Inkosikazi. 'He will dry your bed with one throw of the shin-bones of the great white ox,' she promised.

'Will he also grow skin over my acorn?' I demanded to know. She clutched me to her breast and her answer was lost in the heaving of her belly as she chortled all over me.

The problem of the night water was much discussed by the field women who pondered deeply that a matter so slight could bring the great one to visit. 'Surely a grass sleeping mat will dry in the morning sun? This is not a matter of proper concern for the greatest medicine man in Africa.'

It was all right for them, of course. They didn't have to go back to the Judge and Mevrouw.

Almost two weeks to the day Inkosi-Inkosikazi arrived in his big, black Buick. The car was a symbol of his enormous power and wealth, even to the Boers, who despised him as the devil incarnate yet feared him with the superstition of all ignorant God-fearing men. None was prepared to pit the catechism of the Dutch Reformed Church against this aged black goblin.

All that day the field women brought gifts of food. By

late afternoon a small mountain of kaffir corn and mealies, gem squash, native spinach and water melons had grown under the big avocado tree next to the slaughter house. Bundles of dried tobacco leaf were stacked up beside it and, separated by two large grass *indaba* or meeting mats, lay six scrawny kaffir chickens. These were mostly tough old roosters, four-hour boilers, their legs tied and their wings clipped. They lay on their sides with their thin, featherless necks and bald heads caked with dust. Only an occasional 'sckwark!' and the sudden opening of a bright, beady eye showed that they were still alive, if not exactly kicking.

One especially scrawny old cock with mottled grey feathers looked very much like my granpa, except for his eyes. My granpa's eyes were pale blue and somewhat watery, eyes intended for gazing over soft English landscapes, whereas the old cock's were sharp as a bead of red light.

My granpa came down the steps and walked towards the big, black Buick. He stopped to kick one of the roosters, for he hated kaffir chickens almost as much as he hated Shangaans. His pride and joy were his one hundred black Orpington hens and six giant roosters. The presence of kaffir chickens in the farmyard, even though trussed and clipped, was like having half a dozen dirty old men present at a ballet class.

He greatly admired Inkosi-Inkosikazi who had once cured him of his gallstones. 'I took his foul, green muti and, by golly, the stones blasted out of me like a hail of buckshot! Never a trace of a gallstone since. If you ask me, the old monkey is the best damned doctor in the lowveld.'

We waited for Inkosi-Inkosikazi to alight from the Buick. The old medicine man, like Nanny, was a Zulu. It was said that he was the last son of the great Dingaan, the Zulu king who fought both the Boers and the British to a standstill. Two generations after the Boers had finally defeated his *impis* at the Battle of Blood River, they remained in awe of him.

Two years after that battle, Dingaan, fleeing from the combined forces of his half-brother Mpande and the Boers, had sought refuge among the Nyawo people on the summit of the great Lebombo mountains. On the night he was treacherously assassinated by Nyawo tribesmen he had been presented with a young virgin, and the seed of the second greatest of all the warrior kings was planted in her fourteen-year-old womb.

'Where I chose blood, this last of my sons will choose wisdom. You will call him Inkosi-Inkosikazi, he will be a man for all Africa,' Dingaan had told the frightened Nyawo maiden.

This made the small, wizened black man who was being helped from the rear of the Buick one hundred years old.

Inkosi-Inkosikazi was dressed in a mismatched suit, the jacket brown and shiny with age, the trousers blue pin-stripe. He wore a white shirt meant to go with a detachable starched collar, the collarless shirt was secured at the neck with a large gold and ivory collar stud. A mangy-looking leopard-skin cloak fell from his shoulders. As was the custom, he wore no shoes and the soles of his feet were splayed and cracked at the edges. In his right hand he carried a beautifully beaded fly switch, the symbol of an important chief.

I had never seen such an old man; his peppercorn hair was whiter than raw cotton, small tufts of snowy beard sprang from his chin and only three yellowed teeth remained in his mouth. He looked at us and his eyes burned sharp and clear, like the eyes of the old rooster.

Several of the women started keening and were quickly rebuked by the old man. 'Stupid *abafazi!* Death does not ride with me in my big motor, did you not hear the roar of its great belly?'

Silence fell as my granpa approached. He briefly welcomed Inkosi-Inkosikazi and granted him permission to stay overnight on the farm. The old man nodded, showing

none of the customary obsequiousness expected from a Kaffir and my grandpa seemed to demand none. He simply shook the old man's bony claw and returned to his chair on the stoep.

Nanny, who had rubbed earth on her forehead like all the other women, finally spoke. 'Lord, the women have brought food and we have beer freshly fermented.'

Inkosi-Inkosikazi ignored her, which I thought was pretty brave of him, and ordered one of the women to untie the cockerels. Two women ran over and soon the chickens were loose. They continued to lie there, unsure of their freedom, until the old man raised his fly switch and waved it over them. With a sudden squawking and flapping of stunted wings all but one rose and dashed helter-skelter, their long legs rising high off the ground as they ran towards open territory. The old cock who looked like Granpa rose slowly, stretched his neck, flapped the bits of wing he had left, his head darting left and right, slightly cocked as though he were listening; then, calm as you like, he walked over to the heap of corn and started pecking away.

'Catch the feathered devils,' Inkosi-Inkosikazi suddenly commanded. He giggled, 'Catch an old man's dinner tonight.'

With squeals of delight the chickens were rounded up again. The ice had been broken as five of the women, each holding a chicken upside down by the legs, waited for the old man's instructions. Inkosi-Inkosikazi squatted down and with his finger traced a circle about two feet in diameter in the dust. He hopped around like an ancient chimpanzee completing five similar-sized circles, muttering to himself as he did so.

The incantations over, he signalled for one of the women to bring over a cockerel. Grabbing the old bird by its long scrawny neck and by both legs, he retraced the first circle on the ground, this time using the bird's beak as a marker. Then he laid the cockerel inside the circle where it lay unmoving, its eyes closed, a leg protruding from each wing.

He proceeded to do the same thing to the other five chickens until each lay in its own circle in front of the crowd. As each chicken was laid to rest there would be a gasp of amazement from the women. It was pretty low-grade magic but it served well enough to get things under way.

Inkosi-Inkosikazi moved over and squatted cross-legged in the centre of the indaba mats and beckoned that I should join him. It was the first time he'd acknowledged my presence and I clung fearfully to Nanny's skirts. She pushed me gently towards him and in a loud whisper said: 'You must go, it is a great honour, only a chief can sit with a chief on the meeting mat.'

He had the strong, distinctly sweet smell of African sweat, mixed with tobacco and very old man. After all I had been through in the smell department, it wasn't too bad, and I too sat cross-legged beside him with my eyes glued to the ground in front of me.

Inkosi-Inkosikazi leaned slightly towards me and spoke in Zulu. 'Tomorrow I will show you the trick of the chickens. It's not really magic, you know. These stupid Shangaans think it's magic but they don't deserve to know any better.'

'Thank you, sir,' I said softly. I was pleased at the notion of sharing a secret. Even if it was only a trick, it was a damned clever one which might confound the Judge and the jury if I could get my hands on a stray chicken at school. My confidence in his ability to change my status as a pisskop was growing by the minute.

Inkosi-Inkosikazi indicated to Nanny that she should begin the matter of the night water. Two women were quickly delegated to start the cooking fire and the rest of the field women settled down around the indaba mats, taking care not to touch even the tiniest part of the edge.

African stories are long, with every detail cherished, scooped up for telling a thousand times over. It was a great moment for Nanny as she stood alone in the rapidly fading twilight and told her story. She spoke in Shangaan so that

all could share wide-eyed and groan and nod and sigh in the appropriate places.

The hugeness of Mevrouw with her moustache they found amazing, the injustice of the Judge and jury they took in their stride, for they all knew how the white man passes sentences that have no relationship to what has been done. The pissing upon me by the Judge and jury had them rocking and moaning and holding their hands to their ears. Such an indignity was surely beyond even the white man?

In the sudden way of Africa it was dark now. A piece of green wood crackled sharply in the fire sending up a shower of sparks. The leaping flames lit Nanny's face; there was no doubt that they would remember this teller of a great story of misery and woe. Tears flowed copiously as she told of how death finally arrived in a shower of icy piss that jetted from the loins of the great, moustached angel of perdition.

I must admit I was hugely impressed, but when Nanny got to the part where my snake had no hat which, in my opinion, was the most important bit of the lot, they cupped their hands over their mouths and, between the tears, they started to giggle.

Nanny concluded by saying that the business of my night water was an evil spell brought upon me by the angel of death with the moustache like a man and waterfall loins, so that she could return each morning to feed her great beating sjambok on my frail child's flesh. Only a great medicine man such as Inkosi-Inkosikazi could defeat this evil spell.

The light from the fire showed the deeply shocked faces of the women as Nanny finally sat down, heaving with great sobs, knowing that such a tale had never been told before and that it might live forever, warped into a Shangaan legend.

I can tell you one thing, I was mighty impressed that any person, most of all me, could go through such a harrowing experience.

Inkosi-Inkosikazi rose, scratched his bum and yawned.