

## A Boy is a Boy is a ...

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South Africa, 1985; civil war, blood, contrition. Perfumed annihilation looms above the station platform that is crammed full, full of lithe brown-clothed soldiers. The boy approaches the ticket counter and buys a one-way ticket to Johannesburg; then he walks up the single line platform. A sign hangs above the platform; it reads JOHANNESBURG: DEPARTING 16H15. It is four o'clock; a train from somewhere has already arrived; it shudders on the platform; smoke rises from beneath it, from silver steel manacled tracks.

The boy steps up into the thin corridor of a train carriage and opens the door of one of the cabins. A family sits in the cabin, a wholesome family made up of parents and 2.6 children, a male husband and a female wife. The husband's face is hairy, unshaved hair that stinks of nicotine and raw marrow, husband eyes, yellow and narrow, bloodstained; his lips are naked and self-doubting. The wife shrinks into the carriage seat; her breasts hang low, drunken; they sway lugubriously in the cabin wind. In her hand she holds a faded pink wet cloth that is covered in lime green vomit. I don't like women, the boy thinks. He watches a hand as it desperately tries to undo the buttons of the woman's tired dress – a child; mean, hungry, worthless. The boy watches the woman as she slaps the child's hand away and pinches its fingers spitefully. What do I feel for little children with mean mothers? the boy wonders as he closes the door and leaves.

He walks on, opens the door of the next cabin. Four women sit on the seats; feral women, cat-eyed; ones who love the sensual life but can never attain it; rainbow eyelids and crude-cut yellow peroxide hair. A woman with long sun-dyed fingernails leans over the washbasin and plucks her emaciated eyebrows.

"Ouch," she says, "fucking sore this tweezing is." A red scar on her eyelid. She turns to face the door; her breasts leach, ripe watermelons over the top of her naked vest. The woman next to her pushes narrow legs from out of a short purple skirt.

“Not so bad, hey, not so bad,” she says. Her legs are smooth, mottled with stains, rounded ankles, corpulent. She winks at him. Is that possible? But the boy knows these passions and disasters; the rages, the debauches, the madness. And so he leaves this cabin too.

Two other women push past him, flatten him against the side of the corridor; a blue dress disrobes her desire, flesh uncovered in the fluorescent light, brushed and taut, feminine, emotional pornography. Too many women, the boy thinks. They smell like flowers, wet flowers; flowers that have had their day in the sun, petals soaked with sweat, used and pressed and hardened.

The boy pushes onwards and opens the next cabin door. Inside are two soldiers, healthy superior, in service to their country; men who kill just like all people kill; soldiers that pillage, wolves that follow the living, knowing that soon there will be a carcass, raw meat; servicemen in sunburnt boots and shoulder ensigns, blue and orange and white, the defence force colours of a nation, a nation of white skins, lepers; they are on a journey to the Holy Land, crusaders. One of them leans forward and holds out his stretched lustrous gun; it shines; dangerous, daring, adoring.

“Come in boy,” the other soldier says. He does not hold a gun; instead he leans backwards and stretches out his legs; his cock bulges in the crotch of his pants. “Plenty of space in this cabin. Come sit down, make yourself at home.”

Better than the women, the boy thinks. Here I can smell stale sweat and rancid butter; the smell of filth, of life, of heavenly husbands. The boy enters the cabin through the narrow doorway. “Thanks,” he mutters.

The boy feels saturated with impudence and entitlement, tragic in a sensuous way. How should I act? he thinks. How does one perform in a setting like this? What kind of variety show do they want? A servile puppy that cringes?

The boy takes a book from his bag, a flat black book with a torn cover, stained, the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud. A schoolteacher gave it to him. He taught him a language, the language of a poet; and the boy, in return, gave the teacher a meaning to these musical sounds. The teacher taught the boy in the time when he did not teach in the classroom; the boy’s time of self-obsession and fantastic indulgence, his secret time. And the boy learnt to speak French as if he had been born in France, as if his mother had taught him the tongue while she nursed him at her sweetened breast; he was a Parisian. Now, in this small cabin, the boy holds the book between his reddened fingers and feels indifferent, intimate; he thinks about how he impressed his teacher,

such an acute learner. Memory, a boy's memory. How he made the teacher's eyes a nervous blue, his hands sweat and shake; he wanted more; his mouth was sweet and breathy. A boy, nearly a child, his mysterious ways seductive; he spoke a tender talk, remorsefully.

The boy opens the book and turns a page. "But, dear Satan, I beg you not to look at me that way ..."

"What are you reading?" a soldier asks; then he places his gun on his seat and takes the book from the boy's hands. There is no resistance. The soldier's fingers are perfumed with tobacco and brandy; his face is shaven, but not smooth – callous?

"Not even English, weird words," the soldier says. "What are these words, or are you just reading shit and pretending to understand it?" The soldier turns the pages of the book. "A whole book of it, something funny. Can't even write a proper language, hey? You must be some kind of criminal." The soldier moves his blackened nails over the page; his fingers make a heart-shaped smudge plotted with arteries, blood on a picture of words.

The boy sits forward, and then he shrinks back; difficult to pretend when he is uncertain what the soldier, leering, wants. The boy can't think of the right words to say – a poem, a paragraph of lightning language. I will just pretend breathlessness, the boy thinks; this could mean anything – nervous anticipation, or just a long walk to find a train carriage.

The door opens and a man in civilian clothes enters, sits down. Now there are four of them; the compartment is full, restrictive. The soldier who holds the book passes it to the other, who obsessively caresses his gun.

"Wonder if this young fuck is a queer, a pansy," the soldier winks, or maybe he blinks. "Only a fucking queer reads fucking creepy words like this. And they look like poems. A moffie who can't even speak fucking English properly, this crap."

The soldier with the gun leans forward; the gun presses into him, gently strokes his thigh. He reaches out his hand and takes the book.

"What the fuck are you reading?" the man not in uniform says.

"I'm reading Rimbaud," the boy answers. "He was a poet in Paris, a radical poet. He was shot by a man in the hand once. I was taught by a guy that teaches at the school I went to." The boy knows that he sounds absurd, but he can find no other words; all he can say are the words that he knows, the words that he was taught; a sour bitter truth.

“Paris, France, you mean,” one of the soldiers says. “Not Paris, Parys.” He laughs; his gums are cherry and his teeth are grey.

The soldier with the gun reaches into the bag beside him and takes out a bottle; the gun moves slightly against his cock as the train starts to move. The boy stares at the metal.

“Hey, don’t be afraid boetie,” the soldier says. “It’s a gun. Not just a gun, but a *gun*.” He winks, or maybe he just blinks, again. “Even you have one.” He lifts the gun and caresses it; he strokes his cock through the fawn of his pants. “Love my guns. And you?” The soldier laughs again; the other soldier laughs too, and then he pulls at the zip on his pants as if to pull it down and laughs again, loud sounds. The other man looks at them both, and then looks at the boy. Appealing thoughts move in the boy’s mind.

The bottle moves to a soldier’s lips; his bulging Adam’s apple contracts as the brandy follows the curve of his throat, lost, drunk, impure; he passes the bottle. A bead of brown liquid meanders down the other soldier’s chin, burning lips; he gulps and coughs. Then the man takes the bottle; a gleam in his eyes, he passes the bottle to the boy.

I’m running away, the boy thinks. I may as well drink poison.

The boy takes the bottle and holds it to his lips; the violence of the venom wracks his limbs, leaves him deformed, baptised. Then the train lurches over something on the track, the bottle flies upwards and the liquid shoots out; falls on a brown boot.

“Hey, fucking creep, queer boy who can’t read. Don’t fucking waste it, this is good stuff,” the soldier whose shirt is streaked with brandy says; then he takes the bottle. A stream of brandy travels down the boot, the delights of damnation.

“Can’t waste the stuff,” the man says. “Can’t waste a drop of fire water.” He points at the boy and at the boot. “Come on, lick it up. Can’t let it go to waste.” The man leans over and pushes on the boy’s spine, “Go on lick it up, boy.”

The boy feels a frozen passion, crippled. He looks at the soldier who has brandy on his boots; the man not in uniform gestures to him to get down. The other soldier sits; he watches and caresses his gun.

“Come on, lick,” the man says; then he pushes the boy downwards. The other soldier leans forward and slowly picks up the gun.

“Come on boy, lick,” he says, points the gun at the boy’s stomach, “Get down and lick.” Dying, the boy thinks, I’m dying. But this kind of death, it feels so good.

The boy lies in mud, criminal; the skin on his scalp is dried to dust, shame, blame; absurd pathetic anger. He senses his seventeen-year-old uncircumcised cock rise; the skin moves. He kneels. Punishment. Power. A soldier pushes at him and the boy lands on his hands and knees, an animal. The boy moves his head downwards, towards the floor, towards the boot; he feels the hard leather lather his tongue; he licks; the brandy smarts on his bare gums; the rawhide foot tastes as if it has been licked before. He opens his mouth wider; he wants to feel the pointed heel against the back of his throat. It seems a long time before he sits up, coughing, debauchery in his emotions. A burden lifts from him; his innocence is forced apart, his wisdom squandered. I am dying, the boy thinks. So all I can do is call my executioners closer. I want to bite the butts of their guns. I am suffocating in sand and blood. Misfortune, this is my god.

“I like this kind of fun,” the man in civilian clothes says. “Not so good at doing it myself, but I like to watch.” He turns to a soldier. “When did you last fuck a chick? Bet it was a long time ago, hey? You’ve been in the army and there are no chicks to fuck there. Or did you fuck a terrorist’s wife, hey? Hey?” He strokes the soldier’s hand, softly, gently.

The soldier laughs. “A cunt is a cunt is a ...” he says, then takes another sip of the brandy. The second soldier takes a cigarette from his pocket.

“I fucked a terr the other day. She stank of fucking animal fat and she cried when I put it in her. She must have been crying from excitement. Ah ...! So I just shoved it up her pussy. It was dry, but the terrs like them dry. They make them dry, adds to the friction. Now I like it dry, very dry. Wonder what the wife will say.”

“Let’s see the cock,” the man says.

The soldier looks at him, “You serious?” he says. The boy gets up from the floor and sits again on the seat; he does not speak. Rimbaud lies on the floor; the pages of a book are stained with brandy and grey ash for a cigarette has fallen on the pristine words.

“I’m serious,” the man says. “You said it was big. Let’s see. Let’s see what you put up a terr’s cunt.”

“Close the curtains,” the soldier says. “Lock the door. Don’t want the fucking peanuts and tea girl to bust in on us.”

The soldier unzips his pants; he leans over to touch the gun protruding between the other's thighs; his cock bulges; it is circumcised, the skin torn, cut backwards; the pink head faces the ceiling.

"Still not as hard as I can make it," the soldier laughs. He pulls his cock free and holds it; it stays up and then wanders downwards; the red veins gleam in the fluorescent light. "Jesus, can't get it up. Come here queer boy," he calls. "Fix it. Fix it like the French fix it." The soldier takes the boy's hand, holds it to the straining blood. "Touch it, hold it, stroke it." The soldier puts the gun to the boy's forehead, "Come boy, do it."

The boy stares; he feels his blood stir, his head light; he touches the soldier's cock; it feels like a gun; it is a gun; slowly he moves his hand up and down. He bends his head downwards; the tip of his tongue touches glistening glans, a crimson seed; it moves with its own life in the shadowy cabin. The boy lifts up his face; his mouth is open. He feels the metal tip of the silver gun in his mouth; it moves across his neck, onwards, down his back. I am courageous enough to love this pain, the boy thinks. A soldier – who is it? – pulls at the belt that holds up the boy's jeans; the jeans fall to his socks, his red socks. A knife cuts through his underpants. He feels the tip of a gun probe the hole of his arse; he feels the metal move inside him, that deep black hole; it enters. There is no sound except the light that hisses. A soldier pushes him forward and the boy feels the pain. A cock pushes into him; it goes in deeply. Spittle on a hand, semen inside, the smell of unwashed faeces. Another cock; this time it is in his mouth, someone else's. The boy is on all fours; he turns his head upwards; a man's face stares at him; there is a smile on his thin lips, a grimace, a sneer. The boy's mouth fills with the creamy custard flavour of the semen – whose is it this time? It tastes like whipped cream mixed with strawberry jam. He feels his innocence; he loves his innocence.

And then it is finished.

Clickety clack, clickety clack, clickety clack ... the wheels of the train underneath him. Now and then the train seems to move over a stone, or maybe just a change in the track. The boy lies in a pool, a puddle of his own blood and sweat and semen, and laughs. He laughs because he knows something more now; he laughs because he feels something more; he laughs because he feels pain and exaltation. It is the power that he laughs about, the ecstasy, sublime power; power that he alone has created, bewitching. He laughs as he thinks of his teacher; he would have been proud,

proud and happy to know that he survived, enjoyed the pain; as the teacher enjoyed pain, the pain of rejection by a schoolboy, the pain of a boy's touch. The boy laughs at how much of a simulation it all is, his life a remake. And they were good men these soldiers; they did not kill him.

He gets to his feet. The man looks at him. He puts a finger underneath the boy's chin.

"You did good queer boy. You did good." One of the soldiers licks spittle from his lips and lies back. The other puts his head on the back of the seat; his mouth falls open; his lips are stained brown, nicotine and whisky and semen; a faint whistle emerges from his nose; his eyes are closed; his lips curve into a feeling of satisfaction. The man lies flat on the seat and dreams; he snores. The sound sets fire to grass huts that burn.

The boy picks up his book, the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud; he opens a page; it is torn slightly. Who will love me now, who will love me? the boy thinks. Who will know what I know? Who will know what I can do? I can already feel the pain in my guts. Only I know that this pain is beautiful, that it satiates, that it is divine, that I can do it again. Rimbaud seems docile compared to what he has just done, a girl going to Sunday school, a sweetly sleeping body. The boy closes the book and dreams of the other things that he can do, will do, with guns and soldiers, in calm pale moonlight, a sad beauty; he imagines a marbled fountain, gushing, streaming, sobbing.

The train pulls into Johannesburg station. A soldier pulls his bag from beneath the seat and moves to descend the stairs; the other looks away, his gun held close to his chest. Only the man looks at the boy's eyes. He leans over him.

"You will do it again, I promise," he whispers. "With me next time." And then he too is gone.

The boy rises and leaves the carriage; he climbs down the stairs slowly; he is sore. He stands on the platform and watches the soldiers kiss their mothers, sisters, wives and children.