

BAD BOYS

• ADAM KARLIN

Places can heal or harm you. The wilderness holds spiritual solitude and the promise of rebirth. The city holds its crammed millions and the thousand footsteps of death. The sky, stars, ocean, waves, street, black pools reflecting the night.

People also heal and harm, but, unlike places, we're held accountable to them. And what we do to each other is what we are measured by, because we measure ourselves. At the end of the day, of our lives, all we have left, is memory — a bleeding, burgeoning memory of the pain, joy, sorrow and love we've left behind. That's all we answer to, and we are the kindest, most merciless judges of our own flawed, beautiful existence.

Intshinga, Gugeletu, Cape Flats, South Africa

Every time our van pulls in, the children pour out of their classrooms or scoot across the basketball courts and soccer fields littered with broken glass and rusted scraps of metal and I think, “God, protect their bare black feet, please.” But somehow they know where to step, and eventually we all do, we American volunteers in South Africa.

My favorite memory of this place will always be the boys, who will always be my boys. Siseko, who jumps on my back and barely speaks English. Musipho, my guide to the clicking, snapping tongue of isiXhosa. My long, lanky, little brother, Myolisi. And Luthando, who means

everything to me, who fights me and loves me the way I fight and love him, and in every gesture we share a bond of lost-and-found fathers and sons. Is that arrogant? Patronizing?

You aren't one of us.

The first time I came into the classroom, the teacher, Ms. Angelina, gestured me to the corner. She didn't do much else. At the moment, I felt a bit put off, but in time, I came to realize my presence in Intshinga was as much an

inconvenience to her as a boon. She couldn't create any projects for me

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because, let's face it, her school has nothing ... except human willpower and ingenuity. So that's all I bring.

I watched the children's curious black faces, and they regarded me, evaluated me, wondered at me too. I can't even remember the official lesson that first day, but I remember the kids reciting the Lord's Prayer in isiXhosa, their beautiful eyes closed, their arms crossed over their chests and their soft guttural clicks carrying their prayers skyward past the dank, dirty ceiling. Afterward, they turn to the chalkboard and each other and murmur in unison: "Good day, teacher. Good day, class."

During a lull in the lesson, I start absent-mindedly drawing doodles. As soon I finish my chicken scratch, one of the kids comes up to me with shy eyes and beautiful smile and makes the gesture without language in all languages, "Can I have this?" I smile, shrug my shoulders, and pass the scribble to her.

Immediately, all of the children huddle around me, and I look and see Ms. Angelina has left, and realize I'm about to break the language barrier.

I start tracing my hand, or their hands, or make little sketches of frogs, birds, bees, people, whatever. I make them name the object in isiXhosa, and then make them remember the name in English, before passing out the sketch. I feel like Picasso at an art convention. They come away clutching their drawings like gold.

I watch one boy, a rebel, the one who doesn't look back when I look at him. He finally eyes me with a furrowed brow, thinks about something and motions me over.

"Draw me," he says in good English, laying out his hand.

Grinning, I comply, tracing my pencil against the webbing of his fingers. When I am finished, he snatches up the drawing and holds it, grinning wider.

"Wait. You have to tell me the name," I say, futilely swiping at the sketch. His smile broadens. "Hand," I say, reaching for him.

He jumps away, onto his desk. The teacher still hasn't returned. Where the hell is she? The boy dances out of reach of my arms.

"Luthando!" scream some of the kids.

He looks at them and laughs again, a laugh of triumph and mocking and I think, "Oh Christ, it's me." I finally had to grab him by his scruff and pull him back into his chair.

"Don't do that," I scold. "Dangerous."

“Dan-*jer-oos*,” he says, smiling.

Thus began the days in the school courtyard doing pushups, playing tag, hide and go seek, or just twirling dry sawgrass between our fingers and staring at the sky, breaking up fights and my favorite activity: reading their primers in isiXhosa. The boys would crowd around me and laugh and correct me on my pronunciation until I could read through an entire page without a frown or snicker or giggle from my amaXhosa critics’ corner.

Luthando and I especially got along. We would walk together, talking in our pidgin isiXhosa/English, lying in the grass, running through the schoolyard, telling each other stories and making the world the way boys do.

He would carve gang symbols in his arm with a blunt knife. He would sing to impress girls and refuse to play games with guys and fight them, and he was smart as hell. He taught me isiXhosa songs, and he would smile when I would softly murmur an opening bar, before jumping up and singing the rest of the song with me.

Lu, if I’ve ever committed a trespass against you, I’m sorry.

On my last day at Intshinga, on the first trip anyway, the children gather into a square and wait for sandwiches and cookies we’ve prepared for them. They sing, with that African quality for massed harmonization even the children accomplish without thought. Musi caught my eye, winked at me and motioned me over. I sat down next to the boys and we joked, laughed and played around. It felt like an end of summer. The way summers always are, or always should be, the unspeakable friendship of boyhood I am rediscovering here, thousands of miles from home and too many years from childhood.

One day, I was walking away from Intshinga to the awaiting van that would spirit the Americans and I home. Luthando ran up to me.

He tugged on my sleeve. I leaned in.

“A-tom. I am happy with you.” I realized, holding his thin hand, that I was happy with him too.

That’s when I began crying, and they stood over me in the baking township sun, crowding their bodies around me, singing, “A-tom, don’t cry, we are sad, we are sad.” Luthando touched my shoulders.

“When you leave, I am trying (crying).”

My time there was beautiful, but when I came back the next year, it all changed. I came back to Africa trying to feel a joy in my heart, but there was

an odd emptiness when I return to the fuel of my fire and find the fuel burned up, or out. Now, Musi acts like he doesn't care when the Americans come. Now, Siseko cuts class all the time. Only Myolisi and Luthando still crowd around me, and most of the time they want to know why I'm not bringing basketballs, why I'm not bringing soccer balls, why I'm not, and I want to know why I'm not, why everything on this return trip is not.

Jesus Christ, what did I expect? That they'd hold their breath for a year?

Part of the problem is, I did expect that.

One time, one of the boys, a new boy, spent the day running from me and cursing at me. I never understood why. I had never seen him before. He just called out curses against me and my mother. He curses and runs, laughing. One of the kids hands me a child's iqanda, an amaXhosa war club, and points me after the boy. My blood rushes into my ears until I am blood in my head, blood in my feet, blood in my thighs running toward the boy, who always turns around to laugh as if he's daring me through the blood mist to come closer, blood in my arms and eyes as I swing the club at his leg. He laughs.

I was so shocked at my own capacity for violence that I intentionally missed a few days of school to keep myself away from anything I could hurt. I cut myself off from everything until I could only hurt myself, and then I went to town. Of course, that's not true, because hurting yourself always means hurting the people brave enough to help you.

What's happening? Why does this place affect me so much? Or is it the other way 'round?

I refuse to see anything because I want to see everything. I try to take on too much — schoolwork, reading, day trips, social life — without taking on what I really need to address, my own increasingly unhealthy reaction to the second incarnation of a place. I refuse to see that I am letting myself down by being disappointed with South Africa and I am letting myself down by going out and drinking too much, and I am letting myself down until it is too late.

In my gradual self-destruction, I fulfilled a cycle I had ignored since my first trip to Cape Town. My life had settled into a sequence of leaving, changing and burning bridges. I never realized that, even when I was striking the match. I fell into my own trap because I was convinced traveling freed me from cycles. It doesn't, but sometimes it frees you from the memory of

people you love, and the knowledge of what's right and wrong.

I expected change in Africa because I thought I would learn being abroad again, and I thought change was necessary for learning. But I wanted a safe change, a change I could learn from but a change that was all healing, and no pain.