

Demons

Roland Tye

Julius woke early. The curtains were not properly drawn and a shaft of sunlight had forced its way into the room and disturbed his sleep. He sat bolt upright, involuntarily, as he always did.

They weren't there.

In the bathroom he relieved and washed himself, painfully scraping off the ragged facial hair with a razor that had seen better days. He watched tentatively in the mirror as he did so, his eyes darting back and forth across the space behind him.

They still weren't there.

Breakfast was porridge. No milk or sugar, just a dash of salt. And lots of it. An enormous bowlful that would fend off hunger until long into the afternoon. Julius found much of the food in his new home strange and disagreeable. But the porridge was most welcome, homely even. It also served two important purposes: it filled his belly and fended off the intolerable cold that shook his tender frame to the marrow. The tatty woolly jumper and thick hiking socks also helped, but only in keeping his skin from breaking out in uncontrollable goose bumps. Only the porridge could warm him on the inside.

One of them was there.

As he washed up, she hovered at his back. She was silent at first but her intense stare was as loud as any scream. She then unleashed an almighty shriek that caused him to drop his bowl to the floor where it shattered. As he bent down to pick up the pieces, now trembling like a leaf, the shriek turned to mournful wailing. Julius too broke down into a tearful mess and lay curled in a ball on the kitchen floor, sobbing wretchedly. He remained there for several minutes, burying his head in the folds of his jumper, trying to blot out the noise. Trying to forget that she was there.

A knock at the door forced him back to his feet. She was still wailing and appeared to be signalling to him as he passed her.

'Help me!' she whispered. 'Please...'

At the door was the Bishop. He looked furtive and uneasy, just about

knocking Julius to the floor in his haste to get inside the flat. Only when they were both seated did he relax.

‘How are you, my friend?’

Julius nodded meekly, his eyes in a catatonic daze.

‘Are they here?’

‘One’ he whispered.

‘Let’s leave. We have to go anyway.’

The Tube was teeming with life and Julius relaxed a little in the bustling atmosphere. The Bishop found it more problematic, given his considerable girth. He also feared for his wallet, having lost it several times on the underground system over the years. He kept his hand firmly in his pocket, his chubby fingers gripping the leather pouch determinedly as they entered the train.

There were all manner of people onboard speaking a multitude of tongues, the Bishop’s seemingly random bursts of Umbundu and English mixing easily with the other patois on the train. Sometimes he fell into French and had to stop himself. Julius said very little. The Bishop did not seem to mind and was happy to talk ten to the dozen.

‘It was the best meal I’ve had in a while! We got some really good piri-piri, you know. Just like back home. And she cooked the fish just right. It melted in the mouth!’

Julius nodded, not really listening. The Bishop always talked about food and seemed to spend most of his time gorging on the generosity of his parishioners. Julius had his mind on other things. She had followed them and was joined by two others. They were standing a few feet away, huddled together, their dismembered bodies swaying to the rhythm of the moving train. Something was also rolling across the carriage floor. Julius did not look directly at it but he knew what it was.

A few uncomfortable minutes later he and the Bishop alighted. They followed close behind, wailing incessantly as they dragged themselves along.

‘Now, Julius, the man we’re going to meet today can help you’, explained the Bishop. ‘He’s a doctor.’

They arrived at a suburban house where they were met by a small bespectacled gentleman. Julius was made to sit in what was a makeshift waiting room while he and the Bishop conversed in private. Only one of them had followed. He stood next to Julius, almost over him, waving his one good arm above his head. He was so close Julius could smell his burnt,

putrefied flesh. The dripping blood formed a congealed pool at his feet.

‘I want to thank you, Dr Marshall. This means a lot to me.’

‘I must admit you have aroused my curiosity. I have made time for two appointments. After that, I will have to ask you to pay. My time is money, I’m afraid. You understand?’

‘I understand.’

‘So, tell me again about this man.’

The Bishop adjusted himself in the chair and looked solemnly at the doctor.

‘I found him wandering the streets. He was... still is... in a terrible way. He’d been sleeping rough, eating out of bins, scavenging like an animal. We have a shelter, you know, and so I took him there. It was only after several days that I found out he was an Umbundu speaker. He always spoke in English... perfect English. I still don’t know where he learned to speak it. I have asked him several times but he says he can’t remember. He also claims not to remember how he arrived on these shores.’

Dr Marshall raised an eyebrow and scribbled something down on a pad.

‘It soon became clear that he was not a well man. He is haunted by demons, you see. He is very troubled, always crying, shouting, breaking down. He is able to cope with them, just about, but he was disturbing the other residents. Knowing he would likely be deported if I let him back on the streets, I put him up in a flat I have at my own expense. I believe that...’

Dr Marshall intervened.

‘What do you mean by ‘demons’?’

‘Demons. Ghosts. Spirits of the dead. Whatever you want to call them. They follow him, haunt him.’

Dr Marshall nodded thoughtfully as he scribbled.

‘I am a man of religion’ continued the Bishop. ‘But I am not so blind or arrogant as to think that my faith alone has all the answers. I have tried to help Julius but cannot get him to open up. He keeps everything bottled up, you see. I hoped that a doctor like yourself could help him to face his troubles, to overcome them.’

‘I’ll see what I...’

The Bishop went on, his voice now bristling with determination.

‘Julius has been delivered to me’ he declared. ‘Delivered to me by the Lord. It was no coincidence our paths crossing like that. He has been de-

livered to me so that I can save him. But I need your help, Doctor.'

'Certainly. So he sees these demons? Has he described them to you?'

'No. Just that they haunt him.'

'And do you have any idea where they originate? What could be causing them?'

'I have not been to Angola for a great many years. I spent much of my time in exile in Brazzaville. But I know of the great suffering that the war has brought. A great many terrible things have occurred, you see. I believe that Julius is haunted by the memories of that time. Of the things he has seen. Of the suffering he has endured.'

When the two men entered the waiting room, Julius was squirming in his seat, his head buried in his hands. The Bishop approached him slowly and clutched him in a tender embrace that took Dr Marshall by surprise. As he sobbed wretchedly, the Bishop soothed him with words in their own tongue before adding in English 'this man will make things better.'

Julius sat facing Dr Marshall across an old wooden desk. The Bishop sat to the right of Julius and watched intently, giving words of encouragement throughout the interview. Julius was nervous. His eyes rarely remained still as they constantly surveyed the room, regularly casting worried looks at the man of God.

'What is your name?'

'Julius.'

'Julius what?'

'Just Julius.'

Dr Marshall moved uneasily in his chair. This would not be straightforward.

'Where do you come from?'

Julius looked over at the Bishop whose motions urged him to answer.

'From Angola.'

'Can you be more specific?'

Julius paused thoughtfully. He didn't look directly at the Bishop but it was he whom he was watching.

'I can't remember.'

'Come on Julius,' urged the Bishop, exasperated. 'Can you not remember the name of your own village?'

The reply was the same as before only more forceful.

The Bishop was becoming frustrated. He had been here many times before. His faith taught him to have patience but it wore thin all the same.

‘Okay, Julius’ soothed Dr Marshall. ‘It’s okay, you can’t remember. Do you remember how you came to be in London?’

‘I came on a boat.’

The Bishop’s mood lifted, indicating this was more than he’d ever managed to glean.

‘What sort of boat?’

‘I don’t know. But it was big.’

‘And how did you come to be on this boat, Julius?’

‘I stowed away. There were others too. One of the crew was helping us. We paid him.’

The Bishop now looked mightily satisfied.

‘You see, Doctor’ he boomed excitedly. ‘I knew you could help!’

Julius face turned to a brooding frown and the young man refused to answer any further questions, despite the best efforts of the Bishop and Dr Marshall.

‘It’s okay, Julius. Everything you tell me is in the strictest of confidence.’

‘That’s right, my son. The doctor is our friend. He will not tell the authorities, you have my word.’

Eventually Julius continued, but his answers were given as though each utterance caused him discomfort.

‘Where did you learn English, Julius?’

‘I can’t remember.’

‘Was it at a school?’

‘I can’t remember.’

‘It is highly unlikely,’ interrupted the Bishop, ‘that he would have learned English in an Angolan school. Highly unlikely.’

Dr Marshall turned to his subject once more.

‘I understand...’ and he paused, reflecting on what he was about to ask. ‘I understand that you are troubled...haunted.’

‘Yes.’

‘What... ahem... who haunts you, Julius?’

‘Demons.’

‘I see. What do these...these demons look like?’

Julius appeared confused by the question.

‘You must understand, Doctor,’ explained the Bishop. ‘In Angola, in Africa, there is great belief in the spirit world. It is not out of the ordinary for people to see ghosts, demons, things of that nature, even to converse

with them. It is not like here in England.'

He then turned to Julius and spoke to him in Umbundu. Julius nodded and addressed the doctor.

'They are dead people.'

'Is one of them here now?'

'Yes, Doctor, one of them is here now.' His voice quivered.

Both the Bishop and Dr Marshall appeared unsettled by this revelation.

'Where?'

'He is behind you.'

The doctor went to turn but stopped himself. He removed his glasses, polished them, and returned them to his face, shuddering ever so slightly as he did so.

'What... what is...is he doing?'

Julius looked briefly and painfully at the boy, ensuring not to stare into his eyes. A tear rolled down his cheek.

'He's...he's just standing there.'

Julius began to tremble.

'I think we'll leave it there for today. But I would very much like to see you again, Julius. How do you feel about that?'

Julius was now shaking uncontrollably, his eyes transfixed on the space behind Dr Marshall. The Bishop led him away, offering reassurances to him in Umbundu.

'We will come again, doctor' he shouted over his shoulder. 'I'll be in touch.'

The Bishop returned Julius to the flat in the same stealthy manner he always did. The train journey had been difficult with Julius' shrieks and yells drawing attention to the two men. The Bishop did not like attention.

Once Julius was safely ensconced, the Bishop took the short walk to the café, sitting in the same seat at the back where he always did. His unexpected meeting with Julius had opened a great many wounds he thought had long since healed. A chapter in his life he had firmly closed was now reopened and a host of memories were flooding back.

He remembered those to whom he owed so much – his fallen comrades, the Chinese agent who tipped him off, and his contacts in the church who smuggled him over the border. He also recalled the long, lonely years in exile with only the crackling sound of an old wireless keeping him informed as his former friend, Jonas Savimbi, wreaked havoc

in the name of democracy. And he, of course, remembered the many attempts on his own life.

That was all ancient history now but the young man's arrival taught him that even ancient history could not be completely erased. Julius was a test. The Lord had sent him to allow the Bishop to atone for the errors he had made and for the cowardice he had shown.

A week later, Julius and the Bishop approached the suburban house once more. They had been largely absent, save a brief visit two nights previous. In the past Julius had taken great heart from this but experience taught him that they always returned. Dr Marshall, though, was most interested and urged Julius to recount his actions and movements to ascertain if changes in environment or activity affected his visions. Julius was non-committal, offering no more than shrugs and mono-syllabic answers. One of them appeared, by the door, and he divided his time between looking at her bruised, waif-like frame and the rounded form of the Bishop. The questions were but a distraction.

'Why do you think they have haunted you less this week?'

Julius looked towards the Bishop, then shrugged. 'Sometimes they stay away.'

'And in what way have things been different this week...I mean, did you do different things, go to different places...even eat differently?'

'I always do the same thing' replied Julius, fixing the Bishop with the corner of his eye.

As the session drew to a close, Dr Marshall and the Bishop were no nearer to unravelling the secrets of Julius' affliction. The Bishop's brow had been furrowed for some twenty minutes, his broad face drenched in sweat. Dr Marshall was contemplative, distant, his mind feverishly turning over each option, each possibility, each explanation it could devise. None had worked thus far and he sighed wearily.

'I wonder, Bishop, if you would be so kind as to give me a minute alone with Julius before we end the session?'

The Bishop looked shocked, his body language suggesting this would be highly inappropriate. He eyed Julius, who remained impassive, then returned his gaze to Dr Marshall.

'I don't see what bearing that would have but if you insist...'

As soon as the Bishop left the room Julius relaxed. Dr Marshall sensed a breakthrough. He made his way to the door, positioning his eye to the keyhole as to determine the Bishop's exact location. He was seated in the

far corner, perusing a magazine. Dr Marshall returned to his seat.

‘I want you to come and see me again, Julius. Free of charge. But I want you to come alone. And don’t tell him – ‘ he gestured towards the door.

Julius agreed and a time was arranged.

A week later Julius was late. Dr Marshall followed the rotation of the clock with great anxiety. Perhaps he had gone too far in arranging this secret visit. Perhaps Julius had hurt himself. Perhaps he had hurt someone else. His heart became heavier with each passing tick. The doorbell brought blessed relief.

‘How are you, Julius?’

‘I’m okay, Doctor.’

Dr Marshall sensed a change in the man, as though a burden had been lifted from his shoulders. Or perhaps that was wishful thinking. He’d thought of little other than his new subject all week and had convinced himself that a breakthrough was close at hand.

‘Does the Bishop know you’re here?’

‘No, no, he doesn’t know.’

‘Good...I mean...I thought it would be better if we discussed your problems alone. He can be quite an imposing figure...’

‘The Bishop is a good man’ replied Julius curtly.

‘Of course, of course.’ Dr Marshall loosened his tie. ‘I just find these sessions are better one-on-one.’

‘Why are you so interested in my problems, Doctor? Why, when you know I cannot pay you for your work?’

‘I want to help people. That is why I chose this profession. But, more importantly, I want to know, to understand. Your problems are complicated. I want to understand why you are experiencing them. And I want to make things better.’

‘How can you, a doctor, have any influence over the spirits that haunt me?’

‘I do not believe they are spirits. I believe they are a manifestation of your own experiences.’

Julius became enraged and leapt from his chair.

‘So you think I am making this up?’

Dr Marshall remained calm, locking his kind eyes on those of his subject.

‘I didn’t say that. But I don’t believe these...these spirits live anywhere

other than inside your head. Otherwise I would be able to see them too.'

Julius was calmed somewhat by these words but remained standing, nodding thoughtfully.

'Even if that is the case, you cannot remove them. They are here for a reason...'

his voice tailed off.

'Why are they here? What is the reason? And what connection does the Bishop have?'

'The Bishop has no connection. None at all!' snapped Julius, who turned to leave the room.

'Julius, if you leave now you will be haunted forever. Let me help you! Let me end the pain!'

It was no use. The young man had already left the room.

Months passed and the doctor soon forgot about the troubled Angolan and the demons that haunted him. As always, he lost himself in his work. There were so many people in need of his help, so many problems to be solved. He also lost contact with the Bishop, the jovial character disappearing as abruptly as he had arrived.

The doctor was only reacquainted with the men through sheer chance. He never bought the local paper, finding it too sensationalist and low-brow. Even when he came across an abandoned copy on the bus or train, he did not read it. Yet one spring evening he found himself purchasing the late edition on the way to visiting his mother. He thumbed through it on the train, turning the pages at some pace, the articles confirming to him the complete lack of decent journalism he had suspected. He nearly discarded the periodical when his eyes were caught by a small and grainy photograph under the headline 'African Bishop commits suicide'. Dr Marshall was perplexed. His work brought him into contact with a great many prospective suicide victims and from time to time people he could not save had taken their own life. The Bishop, however, had never struck him as a man capable of such an act, not least because his religion forbade it. He wondered about Julius too and whether he had succumbed to the demons. Such a tragedy would not warrant column inches.

The following morning his question was answered. Sitting outside his house was the young man, looking as troubled as ever. Dr Marshall ushered him inside, offering condolences on the recent loss.

'It is a tragedy...a terrible tragedy' agreed Julius.

The doctor administered a cup of strong, sweet tea to his subject, the cup shaking precariously in Julius' hand as he gulped it down.

‘Why have you come here?’

‘I...I didn’t know what else to do, where else to go. I had to leave the flat before the authorities found me. If I am captured I will be forced to go home...’

‘I can speak with them’ soothed the doctor. ‘I do not believe they will allow a man with your... your problems to be sent home. But you must allow me to help you. You have to open up.’

Julius slumped back in his chair and buried his face in his hands.

‘Perhaps I want to...’ but his words were drowned out by the sobs that reverberated off the wet palms of his hands.

‘You have to tell me your story, Julius. You have to let it out.’

Julius ran his fingers across his scalp, drew breath and opened his bloodshot eyes.

‘Okay, I will tell you. But if you tell anyone what I am about to reveal...’ he paused and eyeballed Dr Marshall. ‘You understand?’

Julius smiled but there was no happiness in his face. He was ready.

‘I grew up in the mountains, in a small village. Its name is no longer important, no longer relevant. But its location is...was. The battlefront between the government and UNITA constantly shifted and our village changed sides many times. The people...my people...were always stuck in the middle. When soldiers came we had little choice but to do their bidding, even though we knew this would anger the other side. Many suffered...were punished...for doing what men brandishing guns commanded of them.’

‘Were you punished, Julius?’

‘One day my friend and I were playing in the jungle. We were both thirteen. Our parents always warned us not to stray from the village but we were rebellious children...’

His head shook ruefully.

‘The rebels captured us and took us to their camp. There were other children too, from other villages. Kidnapping was commonplace.’

‘And what happened to you?’

‘I became a soldier. First they gave us magic powder that made us fearless. I didn’t want to take it but they threatened to kill me if I did not. Once I had, I didn’t care anymore. I was an animal. I felt no pain, no fear, nothing.

They showed us how to use guns, how to load them, clean them, shoot them. All of us were given rifles and told we must guard them with

our lives. I didn't use mine for several weeks – not for real. But I wanted to. The powder made me want to.'

Dr Marshall's eyes signalled his understanding. He went to jot something down but stopped in mid-sentence, fearful he might disrupt his subject.

'Then, one night, our camp was attacked. No one expected it and there was chaos, everyone just shooting blindly into the night. I instinctively grabbed my rifle and hunted down our attackers. I felt so calm, there was no fear at all. I fought well and killed many soldiers. It was so easy – I just pulled the trigger and down they fell. It was like a game. With my help we were able to defeat them and the next day I was proclaimed a hero by the commanders. They gave me new clothes, alcohol, good food, everything I desired. They gave me girls too, which was strange as I'd never been inside one before. I enjoyed it... I enjoyed it even though they cried...'

Dr Marshall moved uneasily, wiping the beads of sweat from his forehead with his sleeve.

'I was put in a special unit because of my fighting skills. I was the youngest and they called me 'The Flea' because of my size. There were white men in the unit: British, Americans, South Africans. Mercenaries. They taught me English. One man in particular who was once a teacher taught me all the time, made me read books and newspapers, that sort of thing. You see, Doctor, in war there is a lot of, what do you English call it? 'Thumb twiddling'. Ninety nine percent of the time you are bored, the other one percent... You must understand, the Bishop could not know that I fought for the rebels. That's why I couldn't tell you before. He believes that I was a victim...'

'You are...I'm sure he'd have understood. You did not choose to be abducted.'

'But nor did I run away...'

'You were only a child.'

Julius looked surprised at this, as though he had never considered it before. He drew breath and then continued.

'I fought in many battles. We carried out raids on government positions, sabotaged their transport, even captured towns...'

He stopped himself, worried by the growing pride in his voice.

'I fought for several years and was promoted until I had my own unit of Ovimbundus that fought alongside the white men. I was a good sol-

dier but I was also crazy. The powder and the alcohol changed me. As did the things I saw. And the things I did. I had completely forgotten who I was or where I came from.'

'Are these demons the ghosts of people you saw suffer?'

Julius appeared not to hear the question and continued.

'When we attacked villages sympathetic to government we made examples of them. We had to, to make sure the other villages did as we said. It was normal to kill...to rape... indiscriminately.

One village had been providing food and shelter to the Communists. They even used it as a base to launch attacks on our people. They had to be punished. We had to send out a warning to the other villages.'

'What happened?'

'We attacked at first light. There was my unit and also some white men. The village didn't stand a chance. Everyone was captured before they even knew what was happening. We took them all out to the fields, separated the men and the women. The men were forced to watch...we took them all...even the children. They were all the same to us. Then the killing started...'

Julius wriggled in his chair, his movements and agonised expressions indicating there were now several of them in the room, surrounding him from all sides. He waved his hands at the air, pushing them away, muttering in Umbundu. He did this for several minutes as Dr Marshall waited patiently.

Eventually he settled down and returned to his story, albeit desperately and through a haze of tears.

'Some we simply shot. Others were hacked to bits. We even made one woman cook her own children in a pot...laughing as she did so. A white man – I think he was American - beheaded one of the girls and we played football with her head.'

Julius shivered. Dr Marshall did also, his face unable to contain his horror.

'I pretended to be goalkeeper and it was only when I caught it...her... and looked at the face that I realised what I was doing. I remembered where I was, who she was, who these people were...'

'Who were they, Julius?'

Julius raised his heavy head and sighed. He had reached the end now.

'They were my own family...'

Neither man said anything for a while, the only sound being the tick

of the clock and Julius' heavy breathing. Both contemplated what had been said in silence, a great sadness having enveloped the room. Eventually the doctor spoke.

'The first step for you was always going to be this – to tell your story, to let it out. I cannot promise that the pain will lessen or that the...the demons will leave you. I cannot promise that. But I do feel that I can help you. There is medication and...'

Julius stood up without warning, leaning over the doctor in such a way that he blocked out the light coming from the window, cloaking him in darkness.

'I'm sorry, Doctor, but there is a problem.'

Dr Marshall looked dumbfounded and murmured his incomprehension.

'You must understand, Doctor, you are a loose end that needs tying.'

The neck broke easily, as they always did, and Julius made directly for the airport.

There was not much room for them on the plane but they were still there, traipsing the aisles with their pathetic gait. Julius watched them for a while, wondering if the doctor would have been able to remove them. It was academic anyway. He hadn't been sent here to be saved by that doctor and he was certain the clinic in Switzerland would be more appropriate, more discreet. He read over the invitational letter several times, periodically leaving his seat to check that the holdall stowed above his head still contained the traveller's cheques and Portuguese passport his employer had provided. A new life awaited.

He cast his mind back to the Bishop's fall and the words he had hissed under instruction.

'Jonas sends his regards.'

Hell undoubtedly awaited Julius upon his departure from this earth, though he suspected he had already seen more of hell than any dead man.