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LEOPARD WARRIOR

A Journey into the African Teachings
of Ancestry, Instinct, and Dreams



sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

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Blood and Tears



They came in tatters, their bodies and minds ravaged by war and life in a society where nothing was equal and nothing made sense. These were soldiers from the war in Angola that had raged for more than ten years, a Southern African “Vietnam” on a colossal scale.¹ They arrived in droves at 1 Military Hospital in Voortrekkerhoogte, Pretoria, South Africa, and it was my job to help heal them.

The year was 1990 and I was an eighteen-year-old soldier, a draftee, in the South African army.² I had chosen to be a medic because I abhorred war—I wanted to learn how to heal, not kill. I was working in the rehabilitation unit, Ward 13, making sure that all the men’s needs were addressed. Most of them had posttraumatic stress; in their minds they were still fighting. The majority of my patients were black special forces soldiers. It was from them that I first learned about traditional African culture and the meaning of Ubuntu: humanity.

The soldiers faced a double war: Angola outside South Africa and civil war within. Black people countryside were in revolt against the scourge, the inhumanity, of apartheid.

Apartheid is an Afrikaans word meaning “separate development,”³ and the different racial groups in South Africa were given different places to live. This made it difficult for most black South Africans to rise above the status of working class. The black majority had been pushed into subservience and disenfranchised. Standing up to the South African government, they rioted and held mass rallies. It became particularly painful and problematic when black soldiers were

sent into African townships after fighting in Angola, forced to turn against their own people.⁴

One Military Hospital offered a brief sanctuary and reprieve from the volcano of socio-political unrest on the streets outside. Within its corridors we did our best to heal the physical bodies of the soldiers, but the complicated social issues were in the hands of the politicians, and all we could do was hope, pray, and dream about a better country for all.

At first, every day I walked into the black soldiers' room, threw open the curtains, and said without thinking, "Morning, guys. Did you have any good dreams?" And every day I was answered with silence. Then, on the third day, a well-respected sergeant from the Recces, an elite special forces unit,⁵ called out to me, "Private, come over here. I want to speak to you!"

I approached him.

"Private," he said, "in our culture dreams are sacred. When I dream, my ancestors show me who is going to live and who is going to die in my platoon. I tell my men. Some of them laugh at me, and they still die. I have learned to be careful with my dreams, and only tell people if they are really listening."

Sergeant Ndlovu was Zulu and an apprenticing sangoma, a traditional healer and medicine man. I thanked him for his teaching. I had noticed that the black nursing sisters respectfully came and talked to him each day. Sergeant Ndlovu taught me my first lesson in South African mysticism, and the more I watched and listened to him and his surrounding soldier brothers, the more I learned about African culture and spirituality.

Soldiers who bragged and complained about pain often had little to actually complain about. Those who were quiet, with an aura of mindful focus around them, frequently had very serious injuries, such as amputations and complicated compound fractures. Often, the complaining patients were white soldiers and the quiet ones were black, silently going about the meticulous business of healing their bodies. On a number of occasions, our senior consultant, Colonel Gordon, noted with admiration and medical curiosity that his black patients

healed three times faster than his white patients. Many people considered Dr. Gordon an ardent racist and a supporter of apartheid, yet he was a good doctor and was typical of the contradictions endemic in the country at the time. He always asked me how his special forces soldiers were and referred to each by name, and he made sure that we had enough vitamin supplements and the special vitamin A and E creams that helped heal the skin from abrasions and injuries. I noticed that only the black men used these creams. Whites considered them “sissy,” but my black patients were oblivious to these sentiments.

An undercurrent in all our ward rounds was wondering how these black guys healed so quickly. Yet because we lived under apartheid, we never openly discussed the question. We didn’t discuss apartheid itself either, but in my heart I knew its end was near. I was determined to solve the riddle of my black patients’ rapid healing, even from horrendous injuries such as amputations and from untold hardship. In them, I observed a steady acceptance of life.

When my African patients rubbed their bodies with vitamin creams, it was like a meditation to them—and they applied them from head to foot! When I went home, I rubbed my body with the same stuff. My father would look at me and then at my mother and say, “Yonnie, you are making a woman out of my son!” Once, in response, I said, “Dad, if these creams are good enough for special forces soldiers, they are good enough for me!” He made no further comments. I continued to use the creams in the same meditative way I had observed. Years later when I had my own injuries, this experience of using body creams helped facilitate my healing.

War was evident on the faces of the men. Their bodies were healing, but their minds were preoccupied with their experiences in Angola. When I tried to talk about it with some of the special forces soldiers I had befriended, I was greeted with grim smiles. “Ag, John, it was complicated there, my friend,” replied Diego Santos, my Portuguese-speaking friend who had been brought up in a mission station in Angola. When I asked him why he had joined the army, he said he had very little choice. It offered him food, education, medicine, clothing, and safety for his family. If he hadn’t joined, the guerrilla forces would

have taken him—by force—and he would have had to fight anyway, without proper education, medicine, or training. Most likely, he said, he would have been killed by the South African forces. So he enlisted.

One evening I stole three beers from the officers' mess, and Diego and I drank them while the sounds of the hospital abated and the other soldiers slept. For the first time, I saw him soften and relax. If he hadn't been a soldier, he could have been a poet or musician, for his spirit was gentle, calm, and powerful. There was humility about him, like that of a priest who has spent many years in meditation. I believed this quality was what sharpened his instincts and kept him alive. Diego was used to being on his own, and he had the resilience of a leopard in the bush. Special forces soldiers were trained to survive alone behind enemy lines for long periods of time. Diego was this kind of man.

Dusk was an eerie time on the wards. The hospital felt like a battleship setting sail for the world of dreams and forgotten spirits. I could hear the murmurs of men talking in their sleep and feel other presences descend on the ward: the lost soldiers coming back from the dead to be with their comrades who were resting, recovering, or dying.

The time it took Corporal Diego to finish his two beers was the time it took for me to transition from childhood into adulthood. He told stories of courage, pain, war, and dignity. He taught me about the resilience of the human spirit. He taught me what it means to be a leopard warrior, long before I became one myself.

Many other soldiers touched my heart and made me feel the sharp pain and joy of being alive. Private Sebastian De Valera had been a foot soldier in Angola when a land mine exploded beneath him, bringing him to the brink of death and taking both his legs. He was a twenty-two-year-old Angolan, with the body of a world-class athlete, who never complained or demanded much. He enjoyed the simple, wondrous things in life, especially listening to music. I saw him cry only once, when someone stole his radio. This had a dramatic effect on the men of the ward, and they pooled their money to buy him another radio. We were all moved by Sebastian's fortitude and gentleness.

I sometimes had the pleasure of pushing Sebastian in his wheelchair out to the helipad where the casualties were flown in. When the sun was shining brightly and a soft breeze was blowing, you would think we were both at the beach. Sebastian often wore a beatific smile, and I wondered why, since he was only twenty-two and a double amputee. But after a while I understood. He was happy to be alive!

The highlight of my time in Ward 13 came one day when we had a special delivery: two new titanium legs designed and fitted especially for Sebastian. When he first put them on and I asked if I could help him walk, he shook his head and stood up straight, reached for the railing on the wall—and walked. It was the walk of freedom; his spirit soared like an eagle released from a cage. His spine was straight and dignified, and he walked slowly and deliberately, with athletic grace.

Sebastian was different from that day on. His recovery moved with lightning speed, and it wasn't too long before he was transferred from our rehabilitation ward. But the memory of that first walk has never left me.

All the medics were nervous one day when we were told that a soldier from the legendary 32 Battalion would be staying with us. This was an elite infantry regiment, nicknamed the “Buffalo Battalion,” that was sent into the worst fighting situations. During the height of apartheid, the government was heavily criticized for ordering the 32 Battalion into some townships experiencing unrest. The 32's members were merciless in quelling insurrection.⁶

Private Sipho Dlamini was a Zulu man of twenty-two years with an aura of strength verging on arrogance. He knew what his body was capable of, and he moved through the ward as if it had no walls. He had very little respect for authority, which had resulted in his demotion from corporal to private. When he first arrived, every day I said hello to him and every day he completely ignored me. Soon I stopped greeting him and just watched him from afar and monitored his healing. I was aware of Sipho observing me too, and I wasn't sure if it was with hostility or not. Then one day while I was working at my desk, I saw a shadow move over my papers. The hair rose on the back of my neck, and I felt someone standing next to me with the intensity of a lion.

I stood up and turned quickly to face my assailant. There stood Private Siphso, tall, deliberate, and ready to pounce. He looked me square in the eyes and said, "Medic, I have been watching you for these last few weeks. I have seen how you treat us black guys here in the ward. You are different from the other medic, who is a racist fucker!"

His lips quivered, and I could see the anger in his eyes as I watched his neck muscles bulge. I still wasn't sure if he was going to strike me or not, and I was readying myself. But then he added, "You treat all of us with respect and you don't see color. From today you are my friend. If you have any problems with anyone, don't hesitate to come to me and I will deal with them for you. Okay?"

We shook hands, he laughed heartily, and from that day on we talked about life. That was a turning point for me. For the first time, I felt *seen*. My love and respect for my fellow soldiers had been acknowledged. I felt a renewed optimism in my role as a medic, but above all I had crossed over into the land of black Africa where I was regarded as a friend and could walk without the curse of being white. This was the start of my life-changing journey.

Sergeant Ndlovu's teaching early on about dreaming had pierced my soul and awakened inner truths that I couldn't walk away from. I too had been called in my dreams by the spirit of Africa. Beginning in 1988, I had experienced a number of profound dreams. In one of them I was searching for gold in South America. When I woke up it was clear to me that the gold was a metaphor for alchemy or spiritual transformation. The goal was finding God, enlightenment, spiritual peace, or a sense of knowing one's connection to all things. An inner voice told me that in order to find my destiny, I had to come close to death, for when we are faced with our mortality, humility is born and teaches us who we are.

I hungered to learn more about medicine and do more intensive nursing, to work with people who were dying or at death's door. An inner knowing was propelling me in this direction. I wanted to make a difference. I asked the matron of the hospital, Mrs. Potgieter, for a transfer to the intensive care unit. She was shocked. "This is the first time I have heard of a conscripted soldier who wants to do more work,

not less!" she said. A few days later, I was told that the ICU was full but there was a place in Ward 8, the neurology unit.

In Ward 8 I learned about the business of nursing, from caring for the critically ill to helping patients on their way to recovery. Within a few days of arriving, I helped another medic put a soldier into a body bag. The ward was medically intense, and I found this exhilarating. It gave me many opportunities to learn. I befriended a few younger conscripted doctors, and we discussed medical situations and head injuries on our tea breaks. I read through medical journals. I learned how to perform basic nursing procedures. A few of my patients had tracheostomy tubes running from their trachea to their lungs to help with their breathing, so I learned how to clean them. This was an intricate process that required concentration, a steady hand, and kindness.

One of the patients I was assigned to was twenty-two-year-old Emmanuel, and his case was the toughest I ever had to deal with. Emmanuel had been injured when an army truck he was traveling in overturned. Almost every bone in his body was broken and he was in a semicoma. We waited for him to join us, but he never really did. Although his eyes were open, we were not sure whether he had any recognition of his surroundings. Every day his mother came into the ward and sat by his side, and every day she asked me, "Do you think he is getting any better?" I replied, "Yes, slowly but surely!" But I was lying. I wanted to be kind to her; the truth was unthinkable.

I nursed Emmanuel for more than six weeks. Every day I took his pulse, tested his reflexes, and cleaned his tracheostomy tube. As gentle as I was, it was still uncomfortable for him, and sometimes he had convulsive fits and phlegm from his lungs sprayed upward like an erupting volcano. I felt these fits were his way of saying, "I am still here!" I spoke to him because I believed that some part of him still knew what was going on. He got one infection after another, and we all did our best to ease his suffering. In quiet moments we could hear him grinding his teeth: the methodical gnashing of a young man whose life had been cut short. That was all he could do to express his profound frustration.

It became harder and harder to find his pulse. I pressed my fingers on his temple until I could feel the quiet sigh of his heartbeat. As his condition worsened and his infections grew stronger, the medical team of Ward 8 met with Emmanuel's family. They decided to turn off the machines that were preserving his life, a life that had become reduced to infinite suffering. Emmanuel's was the hardest case in the whole ward, and when I spoke to one of the older medics, he said he had never experienced such a sad one.

We all struggled to hold back tears, from the toughest specialists to the medical orderlies like myself, and stood by Emmanuel's side as he started to die. The more senior medics found it too difficult to stand by his side and take his vital observations every fifteen to twenty minutes, so they asked me to do it. It was an honor to be by his side. Life is sacred, and each time I touched his temple to feel his heartbeat it felt like a prayer. Each time I left his room I felt the beauty of life and how lucky we all were not to be experiencing Emmanuel's pain. Yet I was incredibly frustrated I couldn't do more. We had the best that modern Western medicine had to offer, but we couldn't save Emmanuel and we couldn't ease his family's heartache.

My shift was about to end, and I knew that when I returned, Emmanuel would be dead. Just before I left his room, I watched him from afar, family and medical staff gathered around him, a small group of loved ones. I felt the heavy sadness of it all.

I prayed earnestly and inwardly. *God, all this suffering is just not right! I call on all the angels and saints in this world. I call on Jesus, I call on Mary, I call on all that is holy and good in this world. Please bear witness to this suffering. Please show me another way to heal, so that if I am ever in this position again, I can do something.* I closed the door behind me and walked out of the ward. The next day when I returned for duty, Emmanuel's room was empty.

Emmanuel's death proved a great turning point in my life. And just as my prophetic dream about searching for gold foretold, the sharpness of death helped me realize my destiny.

The Calling Dream



After my fervent prayer in Emmanuel's hospital room, the universe soon conspired to help me find answers to the riddle of suffering that was all around me. The first part of the answer came in the form of Zen Buddhism.

If you are unfamiliar with it, Buddhism was founded more than two thousand years ago by an Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama. Siddhartha lived an insulated life of comfort and pleasure until one day he left his palace and entered the nearby village—and was struck to the core by the suffering of the villagers. The next day he set out on a journey, determined to find an answer to the existential questions “Who am I?” and “Why do we suffer so much on this earth plane?” Legend has it that after six years of meditating, he achieved supreme enlightenment while sitting under a Bodhi tree and devoted the rest of his life to helping people find answers to these age-old questions.

I was first attracted to the Japanese Zen form of Buddhism because of its simplicity, clarity, and its pursuit of answers to “Who am I?” “What is suffering?” and “Why do we eat every day?” It tackled these questions with Samurai discipline. Its main practices are meditation, chanting, and bowing, and these were a soothing balm for my spirit. I was taught by a lay nun named Onesan, a disciple of the Japanese Zen Master Taisen Deshimaru, whose classes I attended on my days off from the army. In meditation I learned to focus on my breathing and my center, about two inches below the belly button, and found the practice both energizing and calming. In the beginning I sat in meditation every day for twenty minutes, a period that stretched over the years to an hour.

My life moved quickly after my urgent prayer. Within two months of Emmanuel's death I found myself traveling to my first Zen retreat in the Tzaneen forest in the Northern Transvaal province of South Africa. After a harrowing plane ride on a cold, misty evening that made me wonder if the universe might be checking on just how calm and Zen I really was, Onesan's husband, Patrick, picked me up and we drove into the heart of the Tzaneen forest. I felt I was on a mystical quest mirroring my first dreams at seventeen. I remember thinking, *This is going to be big for me. Something is going to shift. Something huge is about to happen.*

The forest was vibrant, and I rejoiced in the bittersweetness of life. I was happy; my reason for living was going to be made apparent to me. I was sure that all the suffering I had seen and experienced had not been in vain. It was leading me to a direct reflection of the "moment world." My fellow soldiers had taught me about the brevity of life, and my Zen practice had shown me how to focus my mind and breath. So now the work at hand was to "just be," to savor each moment and wait for destiny to reveal itself.

A few days later, back in Johannesburg, I had an epic dream that would change my life completely. I termed this my "calling dream."

I woke up in an ancient world that felt tangible and startlingly real. I was in a very dark place, like a cave, lying on my belly on the ground. The space smelled of herbs. On my right was a young black man about my age. We were both lying naked and outstretched before our teacher, as is the practice in a traditional sangoma apprenticeship.

Our teacher was a "witch doctor" with beautiful, shining eyes, black skin, and animal skins draped around his body. I was speaking to him with my mind. I said, "Teach me about nature, about suffering, everything!"

I was answered with a profound silence.

When I asked again, I was met with more silence.

Then I asked a third time and heard his voice booming through my mind: "In order for you to understand suffering, you will need to suffer a great deal. In order for me to teach you, you will get very sick. You will come close to death. For this is the way in our culture."