Bhontsi's Toe

Bhontsi has got a big toe.

We call it the magic toe. It has done miracles for the team. It helps him to kick the ball very hard. He plays as a defender most of the time, but he scores the most goals. He kicks the ball from one side of the field, and scores in the other. He is our best player.

Bhontsi plays with bare feet.

His toe is too big to be contained in shoes. He does not have shoes. It is not to his liking that he does not have any shoes. He has no parents to buy shoes for him. He does not know who his father is. He was told that his father came to Grahamstown with a construction company. The workers lived in tents and left after finishing the road that they were building. Bhontsi's mother did not know where to find the man who had made her heavy with child. So Bhontsi was born a fatherless child.

Bhontsi's mother died.

She suffered from a heart disease. Bhontsi took turns with his two sisters to take their mother to the local clinic. They would get tablets from the nurses to help her live. But the tablets could not save her life forever. She died. Bhontsi now lives with his elder sisters. His sisters also do not have regular jobs. Sometimes they wash clothes and clean houses for rich families in the township. The families of teachers, nurses and police live comfortable lives; they have TVs in their homes and eat rice everyday. They send other people's children to work for them. They can afford to give small change to other people. Bhontsi's sisters receive a "thank

you" from the people they work for. When they get money, they buy food for themselves and Bhontsi to eat. Bhontsi sometimes goes for days on an empty stomach; he told me the other day when I shared my food with him.

Bhontsi is a grown man now.

He is only twelve, just a year older than me. He looks after himself, the way grown-up men are wont to do, that's what he said to me the other day. Sometimes he works and then he buys food for himself with the "thank yous" he receives from people. He usually goes to the police barracks. His sisters play with their male friends in the barracks. They sometimes sleep there. Their male friends are police.

Police shoot people.

People kill the police. They make the police wear tyres like necklaces and set them alight. Sometimes they throw bottles filled with petrol and sand into police houses. Sometimes the impimpis are also burned to death by the people. The impimpis tell police where to find the people called terrorists. The people called terrorists kill other people, the impimpis say. The soldiers want to kill terrorists, too. I have seen soldiers, they are brown, and I have seen police, they are blue, but I do not know the colour of the terrorist.

My father says the war was started by the police and the soldiers, who are trying to kill the terrorists. The impimpis and other people get hit the way you hit the branch of a tree trying to hit a bird sitting on it. He says there are no terrorists. The people killed by the soldiers and police are comrades fighting for our liberation. I don't know what they want to liberate us from. But I've seen the lifeless body of a comrade, lying still in a pool of thick blood. He was shot by the police, they say.

I don't want my father to die.

I asked my father if he was a comrade. 'You, you have a big mouth,' he said. I went to my mother in the kitchen and said to her, 'Mother, do you think Father is a comrade?' She

turned and slapped me with a wet dishcloth: 'You are going to be an impimpi, this curious little thing!'

I don't want to be an impimpi. I don't want to be a comrade, either. I just want to be a child. I want to play soccer and be happy every day.

The police are friendly to Bhontsi.

Sometimes they send him to the shops. The other times they tell him to bring their girls. Bhontsi says one of them gave him a real gun to hold the other day. Bhontsi says the real gun was heavy in his hand. It made his hand shake and there were drum-beats in his chest. Bhontsi does not want to hold a real gun again. He just wants to get money to buy food. The police give him food sometimes. On other occasions, they give him money. When he comes back from the shop with small change, they say, 'Keep the change, my laaitie.' He gets a lot of money that way.

He collected enough "thank you" money to buy himself a pair of black Idler shoes. The front of the shoes had a square shape like the nose of a cow.

Bhontsi's shoes got a big hole.

It was barely a week after he bought himself the new shoes, and other children were already making fun of Bhontsi. They said he didn't know how to walk with shoes. He walked like a castrated monkey, they said. I didn't like what they were saying about Bhontsi. 'These shoes are eating me, sonny,' he said.

'Why don't you stop wearing them?' I asked.

'You guys are gonna laugh at me.'

'I won't. I promise.'

'Others will laugh. And you will also laugh when they laugh. They laugh when I don't have shoes. They also laugh when I have the shoes. What do they want?' Bhontsi asked. He sounded devastated. I wanted to console him.

'Don't worry, sonny. We'll tell them to go to hell.'

Bhontsi wears size six. He wears the same size as my eldest sister who goes to the big schools. It was strange to see Bhontsi in shoes, but I was glad that he looked like other children. But soon his toe was peeping through as if watching and listening to everything that was happening outside. Bhontsi says he does not understand how the hole was opened. He only felt fresh air on his toe and that's when he realised that there was a hole in his shoe.

Bhontsi does not wear shoes anymore.

He's got the toughest feet around. Some say he's got crocodile feet. They are wrong. Crocodiles don't play football. Bhontsi is good at football. They also don't walk long distances as Bhontsi does. The police send Bhontsi to faraway places. Sometimes they ask him to buy bread for them. Sometimes he buys liquor from the tavern. Sometimes they send him to a faraway place, where he buys the green stuff for the police. He knows how to hide the green stuff from the other police. He never puts it in his pockets because his pockets have holes. He folds his pants and puts the green stuff in there. The police love the green stuff. It makes them happy. They laugh loud and even shoot in the air after smoking it.

Bhontsi is not available to play today.

I saw him going to the police barracks this morning. He was clad in his usual maroon pants and brown T-shirt. These clothes have been on Bhontsi's body for a very long time. Some say he is a cow because he never changes his colours. The T-shirt is now full of holes. There are more holes than there is a T-shirt. He was carrying plastic bags, full of many nice things. He was taking the nice things to the barracks.

I asked him to come with us to the match. But he said he was unable to join us. He said he was visiting the barracks with his two sisters and their male friends.

'It's end of the month, sonny,' he said. 'The police got paid yesterday and I'm gonna get lots of tips today.'

'Please drop those things and come back. You'll go after the match,' I pleaded with him.

'I can't, sonny. Today is very busy. I have to burn the meat and do many things.'

He explained that the police were very generous when they got drunk. They would send him to the tavern to get more beer. Every trip would be worth a tip. They would also put meat on burning coals. The police didn't know how to make fire. Bhontsi would prepare everything for them. They would leave him with the meat. He would take meat from the braai-stand while they were busy cuddling his sisters. I salivated at the mere mention of burned meat. I would have loved to taste that meat. But there was a match to play. And Bhontsi told me that it was his job to assist the lazy cops.

'Job is job, sonny!' he said. Bhontsi left school at Standard One, after the death of his mother. I don't know when he learned to speak the white man's language. But that's what he said. And then he went to the barracks.

We need Bhontsi's magic toe to score for us.

The score now is 8–5 and we are leading. I have scored three of the eight goals. The game will end if we score two more goals. I don't want to score. There will be another fight if the game ends now. The other boys will beat me because I scored. They always want to fight after the end of a game, especially when they lose. Bhontsi is not here to fight for us. His hands are as tough as his feet. All the other boys are scared of him. I have never seen Bhontsi beating anyone. They are just scared of him. They are scared of his toe. They say with those big feet he could kick a pig to death. I still hope that Bhontsi will come and join us.

Unexpected guests come.

A convoy of Hippos, Casspirs and other armoured vehicles emerge from behind the police barracks. Soldiers wearing brown clothes and helmets appear atop the vehicles.

They are carrying automatic rifles like they are carrying brooms. The rifles are pointed towards the sky. We stop playing. We stand frozen. No one says anything. All of us are looking in the direction of the soldiers. Three Casspirs come towards us while the rest of the convoy drives through the township. The terror of last night is back to haunt me even though the sun is piercing the soil.

I slept under the bed last night.

My mother saw a security searchlight beaming through our windows. She peeped through the keyhole and saw a convoy of armoured vehicles coming towards the township. She turned to my father and said, 'It's a raid!' My mother's eyes were large. My father jumped up and also took a look through the keyhole. He then turned to my mother and said, 'Let's hide the children.'

Our house is the first one in the township. If the soldiers wanted to destroy all the people in the township, they would start with our house. We were told to hide under the bed, my sister and I. My mother poured a bucket of water into a plastic washing basin. She dipped my shirt into the water and gave it to me. She did the same for my sister.

We heard the big engines roaring past.

There was no knock at our door. There was no smell of teargas. There were no gunshots. My mother said we should stay under the bed. We did not know when the soldiers would come back. We stayed there until I fell asleep. When I woke up in the morning, I was sneezing endlessly. I looked in the mirror. The boy in the mirror had bloodshot eyes, a face that looked pale and dry. There was grey cat fur and spiderwebs on my clothes. I dusted them and raised a lot of dust. My mother said I must wash myself.

Bhontsi is not afraid of the soldiers.

I told him about the raid that we survived last night. He explained that that was not a raid, but a patrol. He said that

President Botha had declared a state of emergency.

'What's an emergency?' I asked.

'It means the soldiers are looking for terrorists at night.'

'And they do that by driving around in Casspirs?' I asked.

'That's why you guys can no longer walk in the streets at night. You'll be shot because the soldiers will think you are the terrorists,' Bhontsi had explained expertly.

But now the soldiers are coming to us in the soccer field.

There is no bed to hide under. There are no parents to protect us. Even Bhontsi is not here. We are just standing here, not knowing what to do. If we run, they will shoot us. If we stay, they will torture us.

The Casspirs stop just outside the soccer field. The soldiers leave their rifles with their colleagues in the vehicles. They say something in a strange language. Miki lifts his hand and steps forward. He says something that I do not understand. Miki knows how to speak many languages. He goes to the school for Coloured children where they learn to speak many languages.

Miki then turns to us: 'Gents, they are not gonna shoot us. They just want to play.' Miki looks at the soldiers. They nod and say something in their language. Miki tells us that they speak Afrikaans, and that he is going to interpret for us. Miki learns Afrikaans at school, and that's the language he uses when he speaks to his Coloured friends.

'They are not the real soldiers. They are school-children just like us. But they have been taken into the military. They will finish their training soon and go to university to become newspaper men.'

I don't trust much of what Miki is saying about the soldiers not being real soldiers. They are wearing real uniforms, they ride real Casspirs, and they are carrying real guns. But the prospect of playing with white people is too enticing for me to object.

We play soccer with the soldiers who are not really soldiers.

They form one team. And we form the other. I don't know how many players there are in the field. There is no referee. We just play, not caring about soccer rules. We dribble past the soldiers. They don't have skills, these soldiers. Miki calls them 'skop en jaag', because they just kick the ball and run after it. They laugh at Miki's joke. They kick us with their army boots when they try to take the ball from us. We don't mind because we play fancy tricks on them and they keep chasing our shadows. They barely touch the ball. I even put the ball through one's legs. He turns hurriedly, trying to catch up with me. I put the ball through his legs again. Miki bursts out laughing. The soldier kicks him gently on the buttocks.

Two more Casspirs arrive. When some of the soldiers get tired, they go out the field and others come and play. Those that are resting sit and drink beer. Some smoke the green stuff. I can smell it. The soldiers are happy.

We play until raindrops start falling.

The clouds have gathered. The sky has now turned grey. There is fresh air, smelling of rain. We know the rain will fall in torrents soon. But the game is just too nice to abandon. Bhontsi would have enjoyed the game. I'm gonna tell him all about it. I know he would say, 'Eish! I wish I was there, sonny.'

'I told you to come with me. You see, now we play with white people, just like the professionals on TV,' I would tell him, and he would envy us.

The ball is becoming harder. I don't mind the hardness of the ball because I have soccer boots. I am the only one with soccer boots in our team. Other boys play with bare feet, tekkies or sometimes with their school shoes. My father picked up the boots in one of the white people's gardens.

White people are lucky; their gardens even grow soccer boots. But now it is raining. And we have to stop playing when it is raining.

Bhongo says the rain is just passing. I think it is passing, too. The soldiers are also enjoying themselves. No one wants to stop playing.

The rain is falling hard.

At first we think it is gonna stop. But then it continues and rains harder than before. We take off our shirts and play with bare chests. The rain hits directly on our bodies. We enjoy the feeling of the rain on our naked skins. If Bhontsi was here, he would be enjoying this game. He likes walking around half-naked. Bhontsi's body has got big muscles and a thick skin. He can walk around with a bare chest on a cold day and never get sick. The other boys say he's got rhino skin. I know that the other reason Bhontsi likes not wearing clothes is because his clothes are always torn.

But Bhontsi is not here. We are playing in the rain. My underpants are becoming wet. My mother will be angry when I get home drenched in water. The soldiers scurry away. They board their Casspirs and leave in haste. We go to the old cars on the open field nearby. The Casspirs drive off.

We sit inside the two cars.

I take the driver's seat. Bhongo leaves the other car because it does not have a steering wheel. He tells me to move over because he is the driver. He is only doing this because Bhontsi is not here. Bhontsi wouldn't let anyone treat me like that. He always protects me. I vacate the space and sit next to Miki in the back seat. Bhongo starts turning the steering wheel this way and that. He makes the sound of a moving car with his mouth. He always has wild visions of himself as a truck driver. The car has got no windows. It doesn't have doors either. But it provides nice shelter from the rain. It is raining heavily. We don't see where the Casspirs went.

We cannot see the goal-posts. We cannot see the barracks. I wonder what if the rain continues until tomorrow.

It stops raining as suddenly as it started. Water is dripping down the sides of our shelter. Small ponds of brown water form on the ground. Bhongo stands in the car and pees into the water. Other boys follow suit. There is a contest of who can pee furthest. I don't join the peeing game. The other boys will make fun of me just like last time. Bhongo has got hair around his pubic area. It is new hair, soft and shiny. He said I was still a child because I didn't have any hair on my pubis. He caught a butterfly and smeared its powdery wings on my pubic area. He said that would help me grow the hair. But still the hair hasn't grown.

A flock of swallows emerges from the side of the sky where the sun rises.

They flap their wings and perform a spectacular display of acrobatics in the sky. They all look black. I wonder if the swallows can distinguish their friends and relatives when they all look the same. If I were a swallow, I would hate to mistake someone like Bhongo for my relative. There must be good swallows and bad swallows.

Bhongo takes out his sling.

We all remember to retrieve our slings, which we keep hidden in the two cars. The police arrest and shoot boys with slings. The slings are said to be dangerous weapons. That's why we have to hide our slings. We collect pebbles from the ground and try to shoot at the swallows. We don't come anywhere close to hitting any. The swallows fly too fast and too high in the sky.

'There's the line of boobs!' Miki says. We all look in the direction he is pointing. 'What is a line of boobs?' Bhongo asks.

'Look at the horizon, you see those beautiful colours?'

'Wow! It's so beautiful,' I say.

'Check the colours. It's like magic.' The colours appear as if they have been arranged by an artist. They start in the sky and disappear on the edge of the horizon.

'Let's go see,' Miki says. I am about to object, but all the other boys are already running towards the rainbow. I join them, and we race each other down the open field and towards the AmaZion Dam where the rainbow seems to fall. We all know that no one dares get into the dam unless you are going there with your church. The people of Zion church are baptised here. It makes them stronger because the underwater people live in AmaZion Dam. Sometimes the underwater people call people to the underworld and the families must not cry because when they come back, they will be the best healers. They will be given the strength and the wisdom of the people of the underworld to help us on earth. Most of the time, people cry, and the swallowed people never come back alive.

The rainbow falls onto the other side of the road.

We cross the road only to find another small stream. The stream is surrounded by reeds. We can see the fading colours of the rainbow hanging spectacularly above the stream. Bhongo takes out his sling and tries to hit the rainbow with a pebble. The pebble causes ripples in the water. Miki also takes out his sling and aims it at the water. His pebble causes bigger ripples than Bhongo's. More slings are drawn out. More pebbles hit the water. Now we have a contest to see who will cause the biggest ripples in the water.

A duck comes out of a corner behind the reeds.

It quacks and opens big ripples as it glides on the water. Two ducklings appear behind it. They are yellowish with fine dots on the wings. They squeak constantly as they battle to catch up with their mother. The mother quacks once to every three squeaks made by the little birds. The sound of the ducks has some melody to it.

'Do you know that a duck works hard to remain floating?'

Miki asks. We all look at him in astonishment.

'This one is crazy. Don't you know that it's floating because it's in the nature of ducks to float?' Bhongo replies.

'But it works hard to keep afloat. If you were to see its feet, you'd understand that it's paddling very hard, even though it appears effortless on the surface.'

'You know what, I have a better use for this bird,' says Bhongo, pulling on his sling. He aims, releases the sling and the pebble hits very close to the duck, causing more ripples. There are more squeaks. Six more ducklings appear and follow the direction of the mother and the other two.

'No, don't kill the duck. What will happen to its ducklings?' I ask.

'Go to hell! I want that meat,' Bhongo says as he pulls the sling again.

'Please don't,' Miki intervenes. Bhongo misses by an inch and the duck flies away.

'We will kill its children, then,' declares Bhongo and pulls the sling.

'Bhongo, please don't do this!' Miki says, but it's too late. Bhongo releases the sling and the pebble hits a duckling. The duckling does not squeak. Its lifeless body just floats on the water. The rest of the ducklings swim helter-skelter, going in all directions. Their mother is hovering in the sky above the stream. She keeps quacking over our heads. Bhongo jumps and throws his hands in the sky to celebrate the hit. The other boys congratulate him.

If Bhontsi was here, he would stop Bhongo from killing the innocent birds. But no one among us has the courage to stop Bhongo. Instead, other boys join him. More pebbles hit the water. There is less squeaking. And there are more celebrations as more lifeless bodies float.

'I am not gonna sit through this,' Miki says and turns away. The other boys ignore him. They are occupied with their killing

game. I sneak off and follow Miki, constantly glancing behind me to watch the other boys. We could be the next targets!

Our shadows are taller than us.

I have a curfew at home. Only Bhontsi knows about this. The other boys would laugh at me if they were to know. My father always tells me that when I am playing with my friends, I must look at my shadow, and if the shadow is taller than me, then the sun is about to set; and I must not be playing outside when the sun sets. Now the sun is about to set. Miki and I are walking home. We keep glancing behind us. The other boys are standing in a single file taking turns to shoot at the ducklings. Occasionally they give each other high-fives, and I know that another life is lost.

We see a small circle of people ahead of us.

There are white people, too. They are looking anxiously at something on the ground. They are wearing blue uniforms. There are two yellow vans standing nearby.

'It's the cops!' Miki announces. We hide our slings in our pockets. One of the white policemen is standing over black ashes on the ground. He is not wearing any uniform. He is taking pictures with a camera. In the middle of the circle are charred remains of a burnt tyre. Someone has been necklaced.

There is dull smoke still rising. The smell of a burned tyre hangs in the air. As we walk past, I see a piece of cloth. It is maroon in colour. There is a bit of human organ showing underneath it. I start quivering. I grab Miki's hand and hold it tightly.

'That is Bhontsi's toe,' Miki whispers to my ear. I take another look. The small piece of cloth does look like the pants that Bhontsi was wearing this morning. It is lying in the ashes. The ashes are Bhontsi's body. The rhino skin has been reduced into ashes. But Bhontsi's toe did not get burned. We walk briskly ahead. I don't want to look again.