

The Legend of Klik-Klik

None of the others really knew where he came from, or when exactly he became such a valued and admired member of the street urchin community of central Cape Town. One day he was suddenly there and then it was as if he had always been there.

There was something different about him compared to the other eight-year olds. He was light on his feet, like a Gazelle, always on his toes. He was graceful like a ballet dancer, dressed in filthy rags. He did not slouch in his poverty or droop his shoulders with depression. His eyes were bright and restless - always searching and evaluating whatever his gaze fell upon, a hunter through and through. They were in awe of his skills as a pickpocket

His coarse hair couldn't make up its mind whether it should grow or not, so it grew in one spot and did not in another. His chocolate brown skin rippled where muscle and sinew were strung taught like the strings on his father's bow.

None of the others understood his language nor could they pronounce his Khoisan name, "too many clicks," they cried. So they named him Klik-Klik. That was two years ago. Now at the age of ten, Klik-Klik had not only earned their respect, he was the alpha male and was fast becoming a legend among his peers.

His shorts, which once were fresh, were now threadbare and matched the remains of his makeshift t-shirt. Once it had colour and once it was new. But now it draped like an old rag from slender shoulders. Nonetheless, there was purpose in his eyes and pride in his bearing. Klik-Klik displayed surprising strength and cat-like stealth.

He and his small group of child pickpockets were "invisible" humans. No one ever paid them the slightest notice and it proved to be Klik-Klik's greatest camouflage. He moved with impunity through the bustling throngs in the busy streets, like a ghost, his arms seem to float in the air like the silk wings of a bat as his hands deftly twisted and turned and fluttered. Thin fingers slid like oiled tentacles in out of pockets and handbags each time depositing their loot in pockets in his meagre clothing that defied the law of gravity as it tugged at the stitches of threadbare cotton.

The "curtain" rose on the city street theatre of Cape Town at 08h45 every morning – rush hour. Their targets: Workers who were late for work as well as workers rushing to avoid being late again. Whichever it was, they knew their minds would be otherwise fully occupied and would be paying very little attention to yet another street waif in rags.

Klik-Klik's scope of vision did not move above waist height. He did not see their faces or their particular race or notice their gender, unless his victim wore a dress. Even then, it was not a conscious thing.

Each morning's performance was brief lest his ragged pockets tear or overflow. The Police were wise to their antics and so Klik-Klik remained ever vigilant; to relax would invite arrest. When the curtain fell at the end of the morning "show", its star performer moved stealthily off the stage.

No one ever saw how his feet bled after a day on the streets, or how he gnawed at something vaguely edible he had salvaged from the trash heaps of the city's bins. The alley was where the sun never shone. It was dark and smelled of the city's garbage. Rats, the size of kittens stole from him the way he stole from others; picking at every morsel he had not secured. When he slept inside his cardboard hovel his meagre frame shook as he convulsed with the biting chill that came with the cold North wind, as it swept inland off a frigid Atlantic Ocean.

Klik-Klik dreamed of one day running free again in the open Kalahari, the hot red sand soft on his feet. He dreamed of hunting with his bush-wise father. They could run for hours and hours as they followed the elusive Kudu with his father's arrow in its side. Father knew that once wounded the Eland would run in a straight line but once wounded the Kudu ran in a wide circle. Wise in all his ways his father would run with this knowledge and meet up with his exhausted prey.

Days of thirst would pass by as their leathered feet pounded the red dust of the Kalahari. Father knew where the water had been buried in an Ostrich eggshell or calabash. Priceless lessons were given and priceless lessons were learned and Klik-Klik never forgot a word.

The sun and the wind had Bushman names, as did everything else that was, or had ever come into being. Klik-Klik had a Khoisan name he knew would one day be used again.

The only worldly possession his family possessed was his father's beaten and dented timepiece that always nestled in his pouch.

White hunters had come to the barren Kalahari and unable to endure the gruelling heat had left. Their campsites were always littered with worldly trash it was all they ever left behind. It was amongst that trash, where Klik-Klik's father discovered an old weather beaten silver pocket timepiece that sparkled in the red sand like a hidden jewel. He also came across a soft leather folder nearby containing three strange looking identical pieces of brown paper. They bore the picture of a man who resembled himself on one side. Khoisan images had been drawn on the other side. His father had never seen a banknote before and did not know what the three identical pieces of paper bearing the number 20 were. After a great deal of thought his father concluded that they were very important and should be taken back to the land they came from.

The man whose image was on the three pieces of paper would surely be looking for his possessions.

The old pocket timepiece became as much a part of his father as his tired smile when the hunt ended and they sat listening stories around the fire. Klik-Klik was allowed to hold the old timepiece and wonder at its purpose and value. His young fingers were so deft that he could remove the silver piece from his father's pouch without him being aware that it was gone. Klik-Klik's father smiled and applauded his son's ability. No other being on earth could remove his timepiece from his person like his son. His father said of him: He could steal an egg from under a brooding Ostrich without disturbing her.

The timepiece was round and flat with a protruding winder at its apex. A silver flap that hinged open at his touch revealed delicate hands, one forever stuck at 11 and the other at 15. It lay comfortably in the palm of his father's hand.

Africa's children grew up with ancient stories carefully woven into the fabric of their lives. Each one could recall with much fondness, sitting in silent awe, under a canopy of stars clinging wide-eyed to every spoken word and gesture of some grey haired storyteller sucking on a thin pipe.

Before the sun rose each day, showing its yellow face over the cold grey city buildings, Klik-Klik stirred and kicked against the intrusion of day not wanting to leave the dream where he was seated at his father's side.

What would his father say if he saw what had become of his only son.

Their journey to Cape Town was as stowaways in a cramped goods van of the weekly Trans-Kalahari. It was bearable only because they were honouring the man on the bank notes. Both were excited and just a little afraid and thirsty.

Klik-Klik's father had come across an old Post Card picture of the Cape Town City Hall, deserted of people. It was indeed a grand spectacle. Surely, the man whose image was on the three pieces of paper must live there. They would head there first along the peaceful streets shown in the faded Post Card. Neither had any expectation or preconceived ideas.

Surely, his father had reasoned, there would be Eland or Kudu nearby. He had brought his spear.

However, the city was not a place they had ever seen; it was beyond their wildest dreams. Vast throngs of humans swarmed in the streets, seemingly going nowhere. More people than they even thought were living on the earth. The world seemed overcrowded. Some were White like the hunters and many looked like them but they could not understand his language. People pointed at them and sniggered and pointed things at them that flashed.

But nothing could have ever prepared them for the noisy stampedes of foul smelling machines full of people rushing in every direction on rubber wheels. Some magic thing made them stop so that people could walk in front of them and then suddenly they would roar off again nearly killing the walking people.

Without warning the maddening chaos separated father and son. Each was carried away inside the surging throngs in front of the City Hall. They were buffeted by a furious wind and bumped from side to side and spun around again and again. The three pieces of brown paper took to the air like vultures chased off their meal by a pack of lions. Outstretched fingers had become suddenly empty of the others' hand and their raised voices were swallowed up in the noise of the wind.

Left on his own in a world he did not know or was prepared for, the young boy crept nervously into a crevice behind the grand old building; a defensive instinct he had often seen among the animals of the Kalahari.

Survival instinct sprang to life inside the young boy. He saw among the street kids of Cape Town the only way of survival available to him. Within a year Klik-Klik had become Cape Town's most elusive pickpocket.

He had a golden rule: Inspect his takings the following morning. Once the curtain fell the greater part of the day was devoted to foraging for food until after dark when he returned to his hovel exhausted.

Every morning he surveyed his take with puffed up cheeks and nodded his approval. A woman's wallet lay open on his cardboard floor. He saw nothing of value there. But a bar of chocolate brought a smile to his face. Klik-Klik ate breakfast. While he munched hungrily on the Kit Kat he fingered through the remaining items that lay before him: A ballpoint pen; a bottle of pills; a cell phone; a penknife and a hotel key-card.

His peers had taught him about money and the purpose it played in their lives. It was then that he realised with surprise what the three brown pieces of paper had been. Once he attempted to beg some food from a Vendor but he was met with a rebuff and threats of calling the police. Street kids in Cape Town were truly "non humans." But Klik-Klik soon learned out of necessity how to trade and to barter for what he needed.

The family instinct was strong in the boy. Whatever one member had, no matter how little it was it was shared, equally, among the others in the group. It was what had earned him great respect among his peers and sparked the legend.

He never questioned the belief that his father would return to Cape Town one day to find his son. When that time came he would know beyond any shadow of doubt.

And so, three months later, it happened one blustery morning, as habit dictated Klik-Klik fingered through the items he had accumulated the previous day. He puffed his cheeks in anticipation never feeling the slightest remorse.

Suddenly, he exhaled in an explosion of anguish as his eyes fell on an item he had last held in his hand three and a half years ago. It was a beaten old pocket timepiece with marks and scratches he knew by heart. Klik-Klik smiled for the first time. He remembered when last he had lifted it from his father's pocket. He knew where his father would be standing at sunrise.

The time had come to go home.

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