

TLC Showcase

PETER WOOD

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Introduction to *Mud Between Your Toes*

A poignant memoir about what it means to be human, *Mud Between Your Toes: A Rhodesian Farm* tells my own true story as I navigate a colourful but complicated life – first as a wild young boy in the African plains, struggling to hide my sexuality, then as an upstart photographer in glamorous London, and finally as a young man in Hong Kong, looking back on a more innocent time.

Born to white farmers in what is now Zimbabwe, I learn from an early age what it means to be different. Politics, travel bans and UN sanctions cause deep chasms between my own country, my family and the rest of the world. After a tumultuous adolescence, I find myself living abroad, where I blossom as an artist – and finally come out as gay.

Based on my diaries from the 1970s, these anecdotes - at times funny, heart-breaking, and yet moving – hopefully compel readers to follow my journey, untangling the layers of a life fearlessly lived.

Writing a memoir is always a cathartic experience, and in my case it allowed me to quite literally peel apart the pages of those ancient diaries, just like the layers of my rather complicated life. Yet, as fascinating and multi-faceted as this experience has been, finding a genre for such a niche book was always going to be a major challenge. Thankfully, TLC was able to view my story from a distance and offer me constructive and objective advice – all of which I embraced with gusto. The guidance I received from Karl French and Aki Schilz at TLC was just what I needed at a time when I was unable to see the wood for the trees. I do hope I have succeeded and done both my book and the consultancy justice.

Mud Between Your Toes, by Peter Wood

Alec

One day early in January, shortly after Dunc and Mandy had gone back to school, mum popped me in the old Rambler car and drove off towards Raffingora, some 20 miles away along rocky and corrugated dirt roads.

'Where are we going, mum?' I asked excitedly.

'We are off to see Norma and Lofty Standage, and Gillian. You remember Gillian, don't you? She's your age. She is someone you can play with.'

I felt excited to see Gillian although I did not remember having met her before. It was rare to see other white kids. Getting around was not easy like it is today. Norma and Lofty were also farmers, living near the village of Raffingora. A few weeks previously their home on the hill had spectacularly burned to the ground after a lightning strike. Nothing remained of the old thatched farmhouse except the corrugated-iron kitchen, which like many farmhouses was built apart from the main house, not for practical purposes, but to keep the cook out of your hair. To my astonishment, the old house was literally a charred pile of ash still slightly smoking, the odd whitewashed wall from one of the rooms still stood crumbling and now blackened with soot. A hundred yards away, nestled under a mountain acacia, stood a single white, thatched *rondavel*¹. This was where Granny Standage lived.

Mum and I, led by Lofty, Norma and Gillian all piled into the small, cramped *rondavel* for tea and the most delicious home-made date cake I had ever tasted. Thank goodness the kitchen still stood, I thought.

Gillian and I chatted and played while the adults looked over at us with more interest than we really deserved. Then Gillian took me down a rocky pathway dotted with mauve aloes and Christ's Thorn to the red-brick tobacco sheds and barns. 'This is where we live now,' she gestured, showing me into a gloomy windowless interior with four old brass beds separated only by a flimsy curtain. 'It's all we could get out of the house before it burned down,' she explained.

1 A *rondavel* (from the Afrikaans word *rondawel*) is a Westernised version of an African-style hut.

The place smelt pungently of tobacco scrap. A nail was hammered into the wall next to each bed, where a sponge bag hung rather incongruously. My curiosity getting the better of me, I asked where they washed and bathed. 'Oh, we managed to pull the old bathtub down the hill and we've made a wash area outside on a piece of flat concrete. I hate it. It's just like the *mntus* have.' I wanted to tell her that I loved washing in a tub outdoors, but explaining this would require giving up too many secrets and I knew Alec would be furious.

I heard the car starting up near the *rondavel*. 'I have to go!' I shouted to Gillian and ran outside. But already the car was a hundred or so yards down the hill, dust gathering in its wake.

I ran after it shouting for my mum to stop. But the vehicle just kept going. On and on I ran, tears streaking down my now dusty face. How could she? How could she just forget me? 'Mum, don't leave me! Come back!' I shouted one last time as the car finally turned the bend and disappeared from sight. Slowly the dust settled and I stared at the empty road, willing the car to turn around and come back for me.

'Pete,' said a kindly voice behind me. It was Norma. 'Didn't your mum tell you? You are staying with us now. You have to start going to school in Raffingora with Gillian and the other white kids. You're a big boy now. Don't worry, you'll love it. So many people to play with. And so many adventures.'

But I already had people to play with, I thought. I already had adventures. And I had Alec. I had never been away from my mum and I simply didn't understand. Mandy and Duncan never had to do this. They went to a proper school. They didn't have to sleep in a barn surrounded by strange people. They didn't have to eat in a *rondavel* cluttered with a piano, piles of furniture and an old woman with white hair. Why me?

To my little mind this was treachery and the first day at school I decided to cry non-stop all day. Even 40 years later I loathe and detest the story of Peter Rabbit. I blamed the end of my baby days on Beatrix Potter and that spiteful rabbit. I wasn't to know that mum had left without saying goodbye because she did not want me to see the tears rolling down her cheeks.

Routine and distance blurred the boundaries. I suppose I began to have fun. I loved my teacher Lorraine. And I learned that I had a talent. I could draw well. Also on the plus side I adored Gillian. Norma and Granny Standage taught us about food. There

were cakes, scones, flapjacks and we were always allowed to lick the bowl. Beautiful aromas constantly wafted from that tiny, tin kitchen. My own mum rarely cooked and never baked cakes. Lofty slowly became like a surrogate father. And living in a barn taught me for the first time that to be different was not necessarily a bad thing. Life once again was an adventure.

The folks from Raffingora were different to those in Umvukwes. The Raff crowd were not quite so snooty, they were more artistic and liberal minded and not so set in their ways. I was not too surprised to learn later in life that this is where the writer Doris Lessing spent many years living in a simple thatched house overlooking the beautiful Ayrshire hills (although perhaps not quite as happy as one might imagine – she did abandon her husband and kids all in the name of art). Some of her greatest collected works, such as *This Was The Old Chief's Country* and *The Sun Between Their Feet*, were written just up the road.

Many whites across the country naturally felt that Lessing was a typical liberal sell-out. Some were simply 'disappointed' that she left her poor children behind. The Raffingora crowd felt otherwise. Her short story called *Old John's Place* tells of the farmers in Raffingora as 'people of the district, mostly solidly established farmers who intended to live and die on their land'. She foretold a time when Africa would take back what belonged to it. In her own words, 'Africa gives you the knowledge that man is a small creature, among other creatures, in a large landscape.' How fitting.

At first I was a weekday boarder. Back at home on Saturday afternoons I would still sneak down to the compound to play with Alec. But something intangible had changed and would stay changed forever. That age of innocence was gone. As I met other kids my own age and skin colour, as I began to learn drawing, sums and crafts, I started to see a world outside the confines of the farm, and my feelings for Alec shifted. Alec saw this too and he slowly began drawing further and further away. Nanny stopped wrapping me in her *doek* and taking me down to the compound.

'Besides,' she said, 'you are getting too *makulu*².'

Within a year I would not even look at Alec. I seemed hardly to notice him when we drove past the compound in the back of the Land Rover, laughing with my brother and sister and maybe one or two of my new-found friends. Occasionally I

2 Chilapalapa word meaning 'big'.

would glance at Alec among a group of other African kids as we drove by. I rarely acknowledged his wave or his smile. All he got was the dust from the vehicle and a bitching from one of the *madala* women for nearly getting run over. No longer would cast-off clothes be delivered to the hut, warm from the iron and smelling of Omo washing powder. Sometimes there would be food, after all Fred was the cook boy. But a distance had developed between the two of us boys.

When I naively asked nanny why Alec never came up to the back of the house to play, she gently explained, 'It's not good, piccanin boss. You are a man now and you must not play with the African kids. The *nkosi*³ will get angry and fire me.' She was kind, but firm. Our friendship was finished.

Sunday afternoons were hell. While I screamed and fought as mum carried me squirming to the car to take me back to the Standages, Alec would pick up his textbooks and walk the five miles across the bush to the small school on the neighbouring farm. He was a clever kid and learned well, according to his parents. At first, I took an interest in his education. I was surprised at how clever he was. Better than me, I thought. Alec's formal education ended when he was 10 years old. Deep down I knew this was the order of things. This was what was expected. This was my new life now.

Slowly but inevitably Alec drew further and further away until one day he disappeared from my life altogether. My very first friend. A boy I had played with and shared dreams and aspirations with. Laughed at the sound of the go-away bird⁴, burned our bare feet on the flat rock as we chased geckos and cried as the soap suds stung our eyes when nanny washed us. Yet my early days were always quite different to those of Alec. Even when our friendship was at its zenith my life was always different to his. At the sound of the gong I would be whisked back to the sanctuary of the big house, the plush Axminster carpets, the cool slate verandas, the soft-sprung beds and silky, cotton sheets. Back to the framed prints of Degas and Pissarro, the delicate Wedgwood porcelain figurines on the mantelpiece and the routine of family life in a middle-class colonial home. Alec went back to the hut he shared with his mother, father and siblings. He was sent to fetch wood for the fire or water for the *sadza*.

3 South African term of address for a superior, master, chief.

4 Turacos make up the bird family *Musophagidae* (literally 'banana-eaters') which includes plantain-eaters and go-away-birds. In southern Africa both turacos and go-away-birds are commonly known as Louries.

There were many chores to do before bedtime.

Years later, during the liberation war, Alec became an active *mujiba*. These were teenage boys who acted as runners and messengers for the guerrillas. *Mujiba* were so endemic in the war that it is arguable they played a major part in the victory for Mugabe. When home for the holidays I would hear snippets of conversation about Alec. How he had turned feral. How he had gone against his parents' wishes. On hearing about Alec's fall from grace, I was furious. Also a little scared. It came as a shock to me when I found out that he was quite likely a *mujiba*. We often spoke about these go-betweens and how we were surprised at their bravery, their unbending faith in the freedom fighters, and their knowledge that the police or army would rarely torture children. After all, to the *murungu* they were just bloody piccaninnies running around having fun.

'Do you know,' my mum often said during the war; 'if I were black, I would be a *mujiba*.'

'Jesus, mum, they are no better than bloody terrorists. How can you even think like that?' we would chorus. This kind of talk genuinely scared us.

'Yes, I realise THAT,' she would say with a dramatic shrug and roll of the eyes, 'but look what they have. They have nothing. Can you just imagine if you lived the life they live? Down there in the compound. In the heat and dust and flies. Well, I don't know about you, but as for me I would want to strive to get more.' Naively, she would react with horror if we asked her if she were black would she become a terrorist.

'God, no! They are nothing but murderers. How can you say such a thing?'

Mujiba seemed less evil than terrorists. Less dangerous. More benign. And perhaps slightly romantic. They had a dream of freedom and one man, one vote, but they were underaged and bore no arms, and therefore escaped the same fate as the adult freedom fighters.

It's notable that many *mujiba* were fairly well educated, at least up to grade four. They wanted more than their parents and even grew to despise their elders. Alec, thanks to my friendship and his intimate knowledge of life in the big house up the hill, was almost certainly to blame for the theft of several elephant tusks among other things priceless only to us, and quite valueless elsewhere. I often wonder what he did with them. My father banished Alec from the farm, like a feudal landlord.

'Never trusted that little shit,' he would say. Like a coward, I hid in my father's shadow trying to forget that Alec and I had been best friends.

Alec returned to the farm occasionally. Once during the height of the war it was believed he was responsible for luring our dogs away and locking them up so that they would not bark when a group of guerrillas, led by an infamous man named 'Mao', wanted to attack our house. Our dogs only trusted family, and Alec was most certainly a family member. On this occasion the guerrillas preferred to remain incognito and the dogs returned one day, well fed and tails wagging. That Alec might have been instrumental in our deaths was uncomfortable to say the least, particularly for his father Fred. The second time was at the end, in those awful last few weeks of 2001, when my parents were being thrown off the farm. Alec most certainly led the troupe who sat outside my parents' bedroom window, night after night, slowly drumming on the tom-toms, like a scene from *Zulu Dawn*. Tormenting. Torturing. Tap, tap, tapping, night after night right outside their window.

By then Alec was a leader and he hated us all with a passion quite horrifying to us at the time. All his life his parents had given themselves to us, to this one family, yet Alec had nothing. Oh, perhaps the odd cast-off item of clothing. And then the final insult, to be banished from the farm. The farm he grew up on. The very place where his mother and father served as cook and nanny to the white people in the big house on the hill. Naturally he was bitter and wanted revenge. So bitter he never even came to his father's funeral, as he regarded Fred a sell-out. Getting my parents thrown off their land must have been sweet revenge.

For a brief period Alec must have felt he was, at long last, the winner. But squabbling and greed soon laid waste to all of that. Like a recurring nightmare, Alec ended up with nothing. Within months of my parents leaving M'sitwe, the graves of the dogs still fresh in the ground, all the money had gone. The country had crashed and burned. The currency valueless. The big house on the hill began to crumble. The sparkling blue swimming pool became a dark viscous pond of rotting vegetation, frog spawn and dead bugs. The lawns and gardens were overtaken by weeds and creepers and nettles and snakes. The shade trees – ancient jacarandas, Parkinsonia and flamboyants – were felled for firewood.

Not for the first time poor Alec became a shadow and drifted away. Some say he went slightly mad. There was nothing left to keep him there. Perhaps that was his

final prize. His last vindictive act of vengeance. Everything my father had, had now reverted back to the bush. The white colonial masters banished just like Alec to wander aimlessly for the rest of their days.

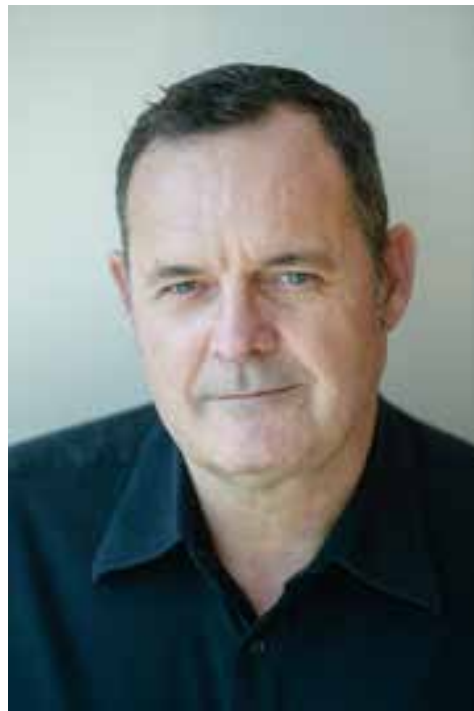
But return, he did, many years later. This time to my brother's farm, he came armed with a head full of demons and a body ravaged by poverty. With an axe he hacked up one of my brother's cows. What he hoped to achieve is anyone's guess. But taking pity on him, Duncan allowed him to stay on the farm in a small hut at the end of the compound. Alone, like so often in his past. Many of the farm workers remembered Alec from their own childhood and kept clear of him, avoiding those sunken angry eyes, the hollow cheeks and his ranting, tortured mind.

Alec Chimbata died of a stroke on 23 July 2014. He was 52. It was my birthday. He was buried on the farm, quietly and without ceremony. Fate deals many cards and Alec, that funny gifted child who was my first friend, was dealt a rotten hand.

About the Writer

Peter Wood was born in Salisbury, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) in 1962. He grew up on a remote farm called M'sitwe in the north of the country, spending the best part of his childhood running barefoot through the bushveld with his brother Duncan and sister Mandy. It was an untamed part of the world and the children were often gone from dusk to dawn, exploring the 13,000-acre property, climbing rocky *kopjes*, caving and camping along the rivers.

Despite a civil war that ravaged the land until the end of white rule in 1980, these were salad days and many of the family's adventures are described in *Mud Between Your Toes*.



At the heart of the book though is Peter's emerging sexuality, and the secret knowledge that he was gay. During his high school days he diligently wrote diaries, which formed the basis for his debut memoir, *Mud Between Your Toes*. The diaries depict a harsh world, in which friends and relatives are murdered in ambushes and the line between black and white was drawn in blood. And a world where there was little space for a young man to explore his identity.

Growing up gay in the bush was confusing. There was no one to turn to for advice and Peter bottled up his feelings, becoming tougher and more rebellious. A holiday to the Seychelles, and an encounter with a sailor from a visiting Australian submarine, provided the opportunity for his sexual awakening.

After a year of national service in the Rhodesian Light Infantry Peter left the country of his birth and moved to London, then on to Hong Kong where he now lives.

He has been granted Chinese nationality and a Hong Kong passport, but still considers himself African to the core. Peter Wood is, arguably, the only white, gay, African man in China.