

JOHN KASAIPWALOVA

JOHN KASAIPWALOVA was born in 1949 in Kiriwana Island of the Trobriand Island Group, Papua New Guinea. He studied at the University of Queensland and the University of Papua New Guinea. As well as fiction, he has written poetry and an opera; he is now a tribal chief in Trobriand Island. In this brief but vivid story, set during the Australian administration of Papua New Guinea, Kasaipwalova assembles a montage of linguistic and cultural codes. While asserting the right to chew betel nut (or buwa) in an airport, his student hero also demonstrates his ability to shift effortlessly among Standard English, pidgin, and Hiri Motu. He narrates "he knewed and we knewed that he wronged all the time," but can also demand that a belligerent police officer produce "that ordinance which specifically lays down that we natives are not allowed to chew betel nut within the precincts of an air terminal, in our own country." Kasaipwalova puts his own twist on the now-familiar code-switching format used by Zora Neale Hurston and others, in which only an omniscient narrator has the capacity to employ language strategically.

BETEL NUT IS BAD MAGIC FOR AIRPLANES

(1972)

One Saturday afternoon in May 22 this year some of we university students went to meet our people at Jacksons Airport in Seven Mile. They arrived and we happy very much. Then we all comes to that backyard corner. That one place where Ansett and TAA capsize boxes for native people who go by plane.

We was standing about thirty of we, waiting to catch our things. We was chewing plenty buwa like civilized people. We was not spitting or making rubbish. Only feeling very good from the betel nuts our people had bringed to Moresby.

Then for nothing somebody in brown uniform with cap like pilot, and wearing boots like dimdim and black belt, he comes up to one our people and he gives some Motu and English. That one our people didn't understood. So soon that uniform man was redding his eyes and rubbing his teeths just like white man's puppy dog. Maybe something like five minutes died but still he talk. Bloody bastard! He wanted our people to stop chewing buwa because TAA and Ansett jets had come and plenty plenty white people inside the terminal. They must not be offended to see us chew betel nut. Anyways, this brown puppy dog of white man angried himself for nothing. His anger now made big big pumpkin inside his throat for because

he was "educated native" and he didn't wanted kanaka natives doing like that in front of Europeans.

Soon quickly one native uni. gel student seen what's happening. She goes and she asks why he was giving Motu and English to our people. He whyed. She seen quickly that his why is no good. So the uni. gel student she says to him to go away. Chewing buwa is our custom for many, many civilizations. Bloody bastard! Maybe this one first time natives talked him like that way, because quickly he becomes more angry. He started talking big and making his fingers round like hard cricket ball.

I seen what's hairpin too and I fright really true. But I walks over and I asks. The uni. gel she explains and he talks also. We talk loud and many peoples they see us too and he say, "Stop being cheeky. Just shut up and do what I tell you. You are breaking the law!" So I says, "What law are we breaking? Tell me! What ordinance are we breaking?"

The puppy he gets very angry and he say "Don't be smart! Just shut up and stop chewing betel nut. You are breaking the law!"

Then my anger really wanted to stand its feet, so I says "Bull shit. We are neither spitting nor throwing rubbish. Black people never made that law and this is black people's land. There's no such law."

"All right you think you smart! You want me to report the boss?"

"I don't know your boss. Run to him if you want to smell his boots. Go on report if you want!"

His face smoked and he walked away to get his boss. I says good words to our people and we continue chewing our buwa. We was really getting tired. Our boxes sleeping somewhere we donno. I chewed my buwa but little bit my stomach was

frighten because the security man will bring his boss. Then maybe big trouble! Bloody bastard!

Not long. Soon the brown puppy dog comes with their white papa dog and two other brown puppy dogs too. They was all wearing khaki uniforms, caps, boots and black belts. They seen us and we seen them too. They come to us. My heart started winking and breathing very fast. The white papa dog, his face like one man I seen one day near Boroko R. S. L. Club.

O sori! I looks at him and truly my chest wanted to run away. His bigness, his face red and especially his big big beer stomach, they frighten me already. Maybe if you seen him too, ei, you will really laugh. Bloody bastard! His stomach was too big for him. I can seen how his belt was trying its best to hold the big swelling together. His brown shirt was really punished and all of we can sees how it wanted to break. But no matter, because the stomach was trying to fall down over the black belt like one full up bilum bag.

Me, it was already nearly too much. I straighten my legs quickly because something like water was falling down my leg inside my long trousers. I dunno what something and maybe only my fright trying his luck on me. But I didn't look at my long trousers. Too many people watching and also my head was boding sweat from the hotness.

Anyways, the security guards came to us. But now we three university students, we was standing together and looking them very proudly. Too late now. We was not going to run any more. We decided to defend our rights. At first they didn't know what to say and only they talked quietly inside their throats. Then their boss, the Australian papa with big stomach, he started showing we his teeths. Oi, we was frighten by his hard voice. He says to me, "Listen boy, who gave you permission to chew betel nut here? You are breaking the law, the legal

laws of this land. And when they (pointing to his puppies) told you to stop, you said you didn't believe in the law and will continue to break the law!"

Straightaway my face blooded because many black, white and yellow people, they was watching us too and this white papa dog, he was talking bad like that way to me. Plenty times I hear white people calling black men "bois" so this time I hear it and my mind was already fire. I wanted to give him some. Maybe good English or maybe little bit Strine. So I says loudly to him, "All right white man, on what moral grounds is it unlawful for me to chew betel nut here? This is a free country of which we black people are citizens and unless you can show me the moral basis for your 'so called laws' I cannot recognize and therefore comply to that law!"

Well, he was very very angry now because one black man answering him in very good English. Maybe he didn't understand what I say.

"Listen boy, don't be smart. You are breaking the law and the law is laid down by the lawful government in the book."

I knows straightaway that he is another one of those ignorant, uneducated white men. I getting very angry too.

"O.K. then, show me that ordinance which specifically lays down that we natives are not allowed to chew betel nut within the precincts of an air terminal, in our own country. As a citizen I have at least the right to be shown that law before you crassly accuse me of breaking the law. Until such times as you do so we shall consider you a liar and one using his delegated authority to intimidate the black people of Niugini."

"Shut up! You are nothing more than a cheeky brat!"

"Your resorting to insults is unwarranted here. All I'm demanding from you is the proof for the existence of such a law. Come on show me the exact ordinance."

"I don't have to show you the written ordinance. The lawful authority is vested in me as an officer to arrest you if I want to. It's written in Commonwealth Safety Regulations Act, section 32."

"Bull shit. I want to see it with my own eyes! Listen mate. Why aren't you arresting those white kids inside the terminal for chewing P.K. What's the difference between their P.K. inside the terminal and our betel nut outside on the road pavement?"

"Shut up you cheeky brat!" Then he wanted to grab my little neck. I was only short so I jumped back and he missed. But his face was red fire. "Since you are not going to obey, we shall arrest you!"

He was making we feel like we was some "bad cowboys" or criminals. All we three university students we was already hot-tempered up and we was arguing with him very loudly. But when he tried that one on me, that was finish for everything. I lost my manners. I lost my calmness and also my boiling anger and fear. My heart was knocking my chest very hard. Only one thing I wanted to be—a true kanaka. So I threw my voice at him nearly spitting his face.

"Don't you dare lay hands on me white boi. This is black man's country and we have the right to make our laws to suit us. Commonwealth government is not the Niugini House of Assembly. If you think your laws are justified, you are nothing more than a bloody white racist! A bloody white racist, you hear!"

I was shaking. The overseas people who was arrived and also black people, they was watching. Our people was just waiting for him to hit me and then they would finish him on the spot. Maski Bomana. We will only eat rice and have good times there. The Australian papa dog, he seen too many black faces

around him. Too much for him. I think our argument already full him up. He starts walking away and threatening we.

"We'll fix you, you cheeky brat! Don't you run away. I'm going to ring the police."

"Ring the police if you want to! Always like you white racists. Each time you know you are wrong or want to bully us black people, you have to use the police on us."

The brown puppy dogs didn't know what to do so they followed their white boss, the papa dog with big stomach. I think all the water in my blood was all red now. I breathing very fast but maybe that was because I already frighten about the coming of the police. I seen many times how they do to protect white men's lives or property. Only last week I seen them hitting some Chimbu men because they was enjoying life from drinks. I wanted to throw some stones at the police cars but they was too fast and they took the Chimbu men away to kalabus.

Then something maybe like five minutes and we hear big siren noise. Two blue polis cars and one big lorry. That one had gorilla wire all around it and truly big enough to capture maybe twenty or thirty natives inside it. The cars and the lorry was all for we three university students. They stopped the traffic and about six black polis bois jumped down. I was really frighten. But papa dog he gets his courage and they march to us. We was standing calmly, because we was ready now. Any time! The polis bois they seen us not making big trouble so they run away with the big lorry, but they stopped the two blue cars.

They comes marching up to we and our people. Also university bus already come and we busy loading up the boxes,

bags of yams and drums. But papa dog he no play now. Bloody bastard! His teeth was already making noise to the polis bois.

"Officer I want you to charge him now."

The polis bois they look very stupid because they didn't know what's up. Only I can seen their eyes. They was very hungry and truly wanted to catch us because white man he said to them. My anger comes back to my head very quickly. I happy little bit, but, because the polis bois was black men and not white.

"Officer before you charge me, I would like to know what you are charging me for and perhaps, allow me to give my side of the story."

The officer he stands very stupidly. He has no words to say. So white papa dog he tells him more.

"Officer, I want you to charge him with the use of obscene language in public and also breach of the Commonwealth Safety Regulations Act, section thirty-two."

All of we was too surprised and we make one big whistle because he was already lying.

"Obscene language, my foot! All right if you reckon I used obscene language, just exactly what words did I use? Go on, tell the officer the exact words I used."

"Officer charge him. I wouldn't even repeat the words in front of the lady, in any case."

The lady who papa dog was pointing to, she was the university gel student with us. So she says, "Officer I don't mind at all, just ask him to prove to us what obscene words we used."

The polis bois they says nothing only wanting to take us away to kalabus.

"Officer they have breached the law under section 32 of the Commonwealth Safety Regulations Act and he was using very insulting language something like 'this is bloody, black fella's

country.' I have my witnesses here." He showed them his puppy dogs.

We knewed fully he was truly telling lie. He only want to kalabus we because we was opened our mouths against him.

"Look officer this man is lying and we have here at least thirty witnesses to tell you exactly what I said. I called him a bloody white racist which is what he really is. I had simply questioned him his rights to force us to stop chewing betel nut here. We weren't throwing rubbish or spitting."

The polis bois was getting very annoyed and they wanted to catch me. But I was only very small and I jumped back. Then one officer he say, "You have to come to the police station."

"What for?" I asks very angry. "We've done nothing wrong. If you are going to believe the word of this white man against our thirty witnesses right here, then I suggest that you are nothing more than puppet tools for white man."

My words hit their shame because many black people was watching them too. Quickly they didn't like me. Bloody bastards! They want to friend with white man.

"Just shut up and come to the police station!"

Truly by now I wanted to give them some. But of, their size and also their big boots! If they give me one, I will really have many holes in my bottom. But I says naski.

"You can't arrest me without telling me what the charges are. Let go my hands! We came to see that our people get to the university and I'm not going anywhere until our people are comfortably seen back to the university!"

I run away free and we start our people into the bus. The polis bois and the white papa dog, they didn't know what to do, so they was standing there like bamboo, all empty. Soon our peoples they come back to university in the bus and we three university students, we goes and we argue some more.

In the end, they tells we three to get into the police car. We goes in but then we sees how the polis bois was going to leave the papa dog behind and take us to Boroko Police Station. So we quickly opens the doors and we runs out. They catch us very quickly again then I says loudly, "We are not going to the police station unless that white man also comes with us. It's hardly justifiable for the police to be his spokesman because this will conveniently screen him from any embarrassment."

What can they do? They knows they was wrong so they calls him back. They pushed we into the back seat, then they opens the front door for the papa dog. So he talks loudly and strong.

"Get in there white man!"

He blooded more and we laugh inside. The polis they was all very silent. We speeded to Boroko Police Station. I knows that place often.

They bringed us to one big table and many police men behind it. The papa dog he didn't waste time. He open one book and he show them.

"I want you to charge them for trespassing under section thirty-two. Under this regulation I have the authority to arrest or have arrested any persons I see to be causing danger to the safety of aeroplanes. . . ."

Then I know he was truly telling more lies and I shout straightaway. "What a lot of rubbish. We weren't carrying anything inflammable. We were simply chewing betel nut on the road pavement outside the terminal."

The white sergeant police, he turns fastly and like one lion's mouth, he yells me, "Listen boy, keep your mouth shut!"

His voice was too big for me. His eyes wanted to shoot and his blue uniform swelling from his fatness. I wanted to say more. But too late! I see his bigness and I hear his voice and that one finished me up quick. Anyways we was very tired now

and we shut up good. Maybe we let him give us some now and maybe later we fight him inside court house. So the papa dog gives more lies.

"I also want to charge him with the use of obscene language in a public place. He was using the words and I quote 'this is fuckin black fellas' country.'"

He tell them more and he shows them more from his book. But the police sergeant and his bois didn't knew what means "obscene language." They look for one dictionary and we was standing there like five or maybe ten minutes waiting for them. They didn't find what means that word. I seen the sergeant pull one telephone and talks to it.

Like two minutes later, we was took to one office inside, near the back. That one office, his name CIB office. We walks in, the four of we and we seen one man sitting inside. He looks like very important man. Long trousers, shoes and tie. We sit down and again the papa dog he starts more talking. Ei, he talks very long, and this making me feel like one real "bad" cowboy or something. Finally the important man shut him up.

"You can either charge him with one or the other. With regards to the section thirty-two, a similar case took place in Lae last year and I remember clearly the new precedent set then. If you want to charge him with that you have to write away for the Controller General's permission from Melbourne."

The papa dog, he nearly cried because he knewed and we knewed that he wronged all the time. Then my turn for explain. I told him about the argument and everything.

"I have my two witnesses here to testify. I didn't use 'fuckin black fellas' country.' I do admit having spoken to him in a firm voice but what I called him was a 'bloody white racist.' As far as I'm concerned these are not obscene words. They are political terms which I often ascribe to persons committing

injustice to others, and I would just as readily call a black man a 'bloody black racist' if I saw him committing an injustice to a man of another ethnic origin."

The important man held his head for long time and we wait like sleeping pigs. Then he looks up and writes down the white man's name, address and phone. After that he told him to go. I wanted to say something but my mouth shut very quickly. The important man, he writes our names in his book then he say, "I will notify you on Monday as to what the charge will be. In the meantime you may go."

We walk out and we was feeling little bit happy. But I remember we have no money for bus to Waigani. The police they should pay us. So I walks back to the CIB office. "Sir the police had inconvenienced us in the first place and I think it is only right they should take us back to the university."

The important man walk out with us to the front office and he called on sergeant.

"Sergeant, arrange for a car to take these students safely to the university, will you?"

That one sergeant same one before. He didn't like it, to treat us good. We three university students, we come back to Waigani. We was chewing our betel nut on the way.