

COUNTRY OF MY SKULL

Guilt, Sorrow, and the
Limits of Forgiveness in the
New South Africa

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Introduction

When black South Africans by the millions turned out to vote for the first time in their lives in April 1994, the world saw them standing patiently from before dawn, in lines so long they often seemed endless. Even those who could not read, and that, arguably, was the vast majority, knew they were in the process of making their own miracle. The occasion was so awesome that when reporters like me asked the young, the old, the women and the men how they felt, one after another uttered the same response: “I’m so happy.”

But beneath the patience and the pride lay the pain of indeterminate layers, the result of years enduring a system so brutal that it has few parallels in modern history. The apartheid regime had kept the majority of its people—black and Indian and colored—separate, unequal. When they protested they were often tortured. Death was frequently so gruesome as to defy even the most active imagination. And for a variety of reasons, those who suffered at the hands of the apartheid state usually suffered in silence.

The South Africans who negotiated the torturous route toward the 1994 elections knew that if the country was to sustain its peaceful transition to democracy, the victims’ voices had to be heard. Some balm would be needed to dress, if not heal, their wounds. All South Africans would have to learn as much as possible about the causes, nature, and extent of the human-rights violations under apartheid. In order to forge a future, the nation would have to honestly and squarely confront its past. For these reasons, the final clauses of South Africa’s interim constitution read as follows:

The adoption of this Constitution lays the secure foundation for the people of South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past, which generated gross violations of human rights, the transgression of humanitarian principles in violent conflicts and a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge. These can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu [the African philosophy of humanism] but not for victimization.

In order to advance such reconciliation and reconstruction, amnesty shall be granted in respect of acts, omissions and offences associated with political objectives and committed in the course of the conflicts of the past. To this end, Parliament under the Constitution shall adopt a law determining a firm cut-off date which shall be a date after 8 October 1990 and before 6 December 1993 and providing for mechanisms, criteria and procedures, including tribunals, if any, through which such amnesty shall be dealt with at any time after the law has been passed.

Subsequently, the first independent body established in the post-apartheid era was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Created by an Act of Parliament known as the National Unity and Reconciliation Act, the TRC, as it came to be known, was designed to help facilitate a “truth recovery process.” It was unique in the history of such commissions around the world in that it called for testimony before it to be held in public.

Controversy dogged the TRC from the start. There were those who believed that the perpetrators of gross human-rights violations should appear before a court of law, as Nazi war criminals were forced to do at Nuremberg; that, they insisted, was the only possible path to justice. But there were also those who pointed out that it was not a battlefield victory that had produced the end of apartheid, but

settlement negotiated by victims and perpetrators alike; amnesty, they argued, had been a necessary precondition for securing the cooperation of the previous government and its security forces. The deal was to hold out the promise of amnesty in exchange for the full truth about the past.

With strong support from President Nelson Mandela, the TRC began operating in December 1995 with Nobel Prize laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu as its chairman. Nongovernmental organizations compiled a list of possible members for President Mandela; the president, in turn, added some names and made the final selection. Archbishop Tutu's sixteen commissioners included ministers, doctors, lawyers and others from civil society. Their mission: to produce a report to Parliament and President Mandela that would paint the most complete picture of the abuses that occurred between March 1960, and May 10, 1994.

The TRC was armed with subpoena powers and staffed with sixty investigators. It would hold hearings that would give victims an opportunity to tell the world their stories of pain, suffering and loss. And it would question victimizers about how and why they had caused that pain, suffering, and loss, with a particular emphasis on just how widespread the human-rights abuses had been and to what extent they had been sanctioned by the apartheid government. Gross violations of human rights were defined as murder, attempted murder, abduction, and torture or severe ill treatment.

The commission was organized into three committees: Human Rights Violations, Reparations and Rehabilitation and Amnesty. All told, commissioners took more than 20,000 statements from survivors and families of political violence. They held more than fifty public hearings, all around the country, over 244 days. The Amnesty Committee, by law independent of the others (its rulings could not be appealed or overruled, except by the country's highest court), received approximately 7,050 amnesty applications—fully 77 percent of them from prisoners. All three committees were plagued by a huge workload and inadequate resources. And even Archbishop Tutu's most eloquent pleas could not persuade whites to come forward to testify in significant numbers. Near the end of the process, one poll suggested that the Truth Commission had done more to hurt race relations than to promote reconciliation. Indeed, the commission itself had to confront internal allegations of racism.

But most agree that the reality is much more complex. Many Afrikaners who charge that the commission was biased against them from the start, for example, also acknowledge that they learned for the first time the full extent of state-sponsored crime from testimony before the Truth Commission. And while some victims and survivors of the apartheid government say their agony won't end so long as perpetrators get amnesty and victims get next to nothing (reparation, for those who qualify, comes to less than \$200 per victim), others say that learning how and where their loved ones met their end has provided a certain closure, a measure of peace.

As of this writing, the Truth Commission's report is expected by the end of October; the TRC will then be suspended, to be reconvened once the amnesty process is completed in 1999. At that time, the commission likely will approve the Amnesty Committee's full report and determine whether it necessitates changing the final report in any way.

The commission hopes its report will provide the history lesson needed to ensure that South Africa's tragic past never repeats itself. The proof of the lesson may not be clear until future generations have had a chance to consider the findings with the grace of time and distance. But one

its certain legacies is the voices, so long unheard, that now speak for the record about a particularly brutal history. Those who testified, those who heard them and those, like Antjie Krog, who report on what they said, are all living South Africans who are struggling to make individual and collective sense of the past and to push ahead into a future that may or may not fulfill the promise felt by the first-time voters in 1994. The Truth Commission, no more perfect than the messy work-in-progress called democracy, allowed them to face together, for the first time, the profound task ahead.

—Charlayne Hunter-Gault
Johannesburg, South Africa
September, 1998

BEFORE THE COMMISSION

CHAPTER ONE

They Never Wept, the Men of My Race

Sunk low on their springs, three weathered white Sierras roar past the wrought-iron gates Parliament. Heavy, hamlike forearms bulge through the open windows—honking, waving old Free State and Transvaal flags. Hairy fists in the air. I run across the cobblestone street—clutching notepad and recorder—to the old parliamentary venue where the Justice Portfolio Committee is hearing public submissions on what to include in the draft legislation establishing a Truth Commission.

The faces are grim in the hall with its dark paneling, old-fashioned microphones hanging from the ceiling, hard wooden gallery, and green-leather seats. “Bellington Mampe . . . Looksmart Ngudle . . . Suliman Salojee . . . Solomon Modipane . . . James Lenkoe . . .” A slow litany of names is read out into the quiet hall. The names of 120 people who died in police custody. “Imam Abdullah Haroon . . . Alpheus Maliba . . . Ahmed Timol . . . Steve Bantu Biko . . . Neil Aggett . . . Nicodemus Kgoathe . . .” The chairperson of the Black Sash, Mary Burton, concludes her submission in the same way the Sash meetings have been concluded for years: name upon name upon name. They fall like chimes into the silence. Journalists stop taking notes, committee members put down their pens—stunned by the magnitude of death that is but a bare beginning.

The double doors snap open. The marching crunch of the black-clad *Ystergarde*—even on the carpet their boots make a noise. The Iron Guard, elite corps of the far-right *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging* (AWB). Black balaclavas worn like caps, ready to be rolled down over the faces. Three-armed swastikas on the sleeves. Then, dressed in ordinary khaki clothes, in walks Eugene Terre’Blanche as if taking a stroll on his farm. Suddenly another kind of noise fills the hall. Members of Parliament, secretaries, messengers, even a minister or two, shuffle into the already crowded gallery.

“We’ve asked for all the committee meetings to be adjourned,” whispers a black senator. “We have to see this man with our own eyes—how real he is.”

Expectation fills the air. Does Terre’Blanche’s adjutant want to say anything? He jumps up. Salute. “No, I say what my leader say!”

The chair of the Justice Portfolio Committee, Johnny de Lange, shows Terre’Blanche to his seat. “Mr. Terre’Blanche, what would you like to see in the Truth Commission legislation?”

It is so quiet you can hear an alliteration drop. Terre’Blanche stays seated. Barely audibly, he asks, “*Is hier waar ek vandag sit, hierdie sitplek, is dit die plek waar Sy Edele Dr. Verwoerd dertig jaar gelede vermoor is met ’n mes in sy hart?*” (“This seat I am sitting in, is it the same one where Dr. Verwoerd¹ was murdered with a knife in his heart thirty years ago?”)

We look at one another. “Indeed,” says the chairperson. Terre’Blanche stares at his hat until the

changed context of blood and betrayal is dominating the silence.

He gets up. He moves out of the bench. Away from the microphones, the guards. He stands alone on the carpet. And the first word that enters the mind, despite the neatly trimmed gray beard, is “poor.” The man is a poor Afrikaner. His khaki shirt is bleached, its collar threadbare. But poor as he is, he is a master of acoustics. He drenches us with sound—every tremor, boom, reverberating corner of the space, under his command.

“*Laat. Die soldate . . . Huis toe gaan!*” he shouts. Let the soldiers go home. Then in a normal voice “*Agbare Meneer die Voorsitter, Agbare Lede van die Parlement . . . Laat AL . . . die soldate . . . Huis toe gaan . . .* [whispering] *Laat. MY . . . soldate . . . huis toe gaan . . .* [in a crescendo] *sodat die weeklag van wagtende vroue en die wringende hande van kinders kan einde kry . . . my klere is nat van hulle trane . . .*”

Members of Parliament ransack desks for translation equipment. They don’t want to miss a word.

“Amnesty is a gift! But for the political prisoner who has never known the coldness and the bleakness [*die koudheid en die kilheid*] of jail cells, whose life has always been woven into the wide waving veld of freedom, for him, Honorable Chair, for him amnesty is . . . a fire of joy.”

Terre’Blanche asks for the cutoff date, now set at December 6, 1993, to be shifted forward, so that AWB members who committed violence right up to the first democratic election in April 1994 will qualify for amnesty. Then the AWB will cooperate with the government.

When Terre’Blanche is finished, committee member Jan van Eck praises his Afrikaans. Casper Nienhaus, the Afrikaans-speaking member of Parliament for the African National Congress (ANC), is less enthusiastic. What does Terre’Blanche mean by the term “cooperation”?

“It seems Mr. Nienhaus himself has mastered only Standard Two Afrikaans,” Terre’Blanche sneers.

Someone starts to hiss. Dramatically Terre’Blanche throws two fingers in the air. “Two bomb planters! The one drives a Mercedes-Benz, and the other one, like me, drives a Nissan bakkie [pickup truck]. The Nissan. Comes late. Five minutes *after* twelve his bomb goes off. But the Mercedes Arrives on time. And that bomb explodes. Five minutes *to* twelve. Now *because* he drives a Mercedes and not a Nissan, *he . . .* gets amnesty!”

Dene Smuts, another Afrikaner MP and a member of the Democratic Party, calls for a point of order. “No, Mr. Terre’Blanche, your Nissan did *not* come late. It burst with deafening noise through the glass windows of the World Trade Centre in Kempton Park. I was there. And your deeds were not aimed at the Big Stealer—as you insist on calling F. W. de Klerk—but at the negotiations for democratic dispensation. Your people are in jail not because they drove Nissan bakkies, but because they refused to accept democracy.”

Incensed, Terre’Blanche gasps for air. “That a woman—and my mother was also a woman,” he shouts, “that a *woman* does not understand what I say!”

He ends his submission. “If the shifting of a date can bring peace, then you must shift the date . . .

justice rules . . . I will talk peace . . . because that is all that I am . . . a simple farmer from Westransvaal who has come to you to put my case.”

The contrast between client and advocate is striking. General Johan van der Merwe, former commissioner of police, sits collapsed in the front row. Whether it is part of a calculated strategy or simply an effect of seeing him out of uniform for the first time, I cannot say. His color is yellowish, he blinks constantly, his mouth nibbles at times like a geriatric, and when he touch-touches the bandage on his finger, his hand trembles. But his case is taken up with a flourish by a rosy, confident English-speaking lawyer from Natal. He is not taking up the general’s case because he agrees with what happened in the past, the advocate assures the Justice Portfolio Committee, but because he believes the general has a point. And the point is politics. The mere fact that a deed must have a political motive to qualify the perpetrator for amnesty is proof enough that the politicians should be the essence of the Truth Commission’s inquest. It is not the police who came up with apartheid, he says, but the politicians.

With an instinct for the dramatic, the advocate gestures in the direction of Van der Merwe. “Yesterday afternoon when we were flying to Cape Town, the general was staring out of the window of the plane. The sun was setting and he said to me . . . he said in this choked-up voice: ‘The politicians have prostituted the police. Once I was a proud policeman, but here I am today—humiliated and despised. My career, to which I dedicated my entire life with such pride, is ending in this horrible shame and dishonor.’”

“We all know that the ultimate reconciliation should be between Afrikaner and African,” Freedom Front leader General Constand Viljoen tells the committee, “and this could happen if the Truth Commission does not vilify the Afrikaner into being worse than we are . . .”

All of us have failed, Viljoen goes on. “We all used violence to get what we wanted. The terror of the tyrant invited the terror of the revolutionary.”

Submissions from across the board. Orgies of alliteration. In the press, Afrikaner intellectuals point out that thanks to apartheid the new government inherited the most sophisticated infrastructure in Africa. Thanks to apartheid political prisoners all obtained quality degrees while on Robben Island—with the result that the ANC’s senior leadership is better qualified than any other political party on the continent. Fewer people died under apartheid than were killed in Rwanda. So how bad could apartheid have been?

The oppressors are weary; the oppressed, foam-in-the-mouth angry.

This is the theme for a kind of overture—but at the time we could not hear it.

From the beginning of March 1995, the Justice Portfolio Committee, under the chairmanship of Johnny de Lange, meets daily to debate the submissions and draft the legislation. The civil servants who physically write the law, sit somewhat apart. They work late into the night to have alternative formulations ready for the next day. “If I personally had to draft this legislation,” one of them complains, “it would have been a lean, simple law—completed weeks ago. But because this has to be a *process*, it is developing into a hell of a unique but impossibly complex law.”

As if back into a womb, I crawl—the heavy-light eiderdown, the hot-water bottle. Through the window, I see the sleeping farmyard washed away in moonlight. A plover calls far off. Overcome with the carefreeness of my youth, I doze—safe in this stinkwood bed, safe in this sandstone house, the part of the Free State. Everything so quiet.

Stars roar past the yard.

A sudden sound. Harsh. “*Hendrik, kom in! . . . Hendrik, kom in!*”

It must be around midnight.

My brother Andries, who lives on another part of the farm, is calling Hendrik, our younger brother, on the radio. The line crackles. “*Kom gou!* [Come quickly!] People are stealing cattle . . . don’t switch on your lights—and bring your rifle.”

The screen door of the rondavel slams as Hendrik leaves and drives away in the dark.

The radio crackles again: “How many?”

Andries: “Two and a dog. They have taken five cows and have just passed the *windpomp*. Do you have bullets?”

I put on my gown. In the dining room next to the radio, my parents are already sitting—in sheepskin slippers, each covered with a blanket—nervous and as if pinned down. I sit next to them. We do not talk. My mother brings a blanket for me. The night is suddenly filled with menace.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

My mother explains. Andries’s wife, Bettie, would now be standing on the roof of their house, from where she has a large part of the farm under surveillance with a night-vision scope. Bettie shouts the information down to nine-year-old Sumien at the radio, and she has to pass it on to her father in the bakkie.

It’s nearly one o’clock. We wait.

Sumien: “Pa . . .? Pa, come in . . . Ma says they have turned toward the road, but she can’t see you . . . Where are you?”

Silence. My parents sit humped up—in the gray moonlight their faces seem carved to pieces.

Sumien: “Pa, where are you? Can you hear me?” Anxiety in her voice.

Only the silence zooms down the line . . . We wait in the dark.

After a quarter of an hour, the radio comes to life. It’s Andries. Breathless: “We’ve found one, but the other got away. Tell Ma to get down from the roof and lock the doors.”

We wait. Then we think we hear shots. The dogs bark. We wait. Who did the shooting? Who has

been shot? And which is worse? What fierce scenes are being played out in the veld?

The family photo catches my eye. I look at my smiling, *borselkop* brothers. I remember how Hendrik clutched my mother's arm when she was paging to the bookmark in the children's Bible. "Please, please don't read the bit about that guy who wants to cut his child's throat in the veld."

What are my brothers experiencing tonight that I cannot even imagine?

We wait an eternity. At last, the line finds its voice: "Call an ambulance and tell them to come to the dam."

It is one of my brothers. But the voice sounds so tense that we cannot tell who's speaking. We three are sitting there—the moon has lost its abundance. We sit—each with our own disproportionate thoughts. My mother gets up with a tired heaviness. In the kitchen, she makes tea. My father and I sit without speaking. I take my tea to my icy bed. My eyes dry in the dark.

"The idea of a Truth Commission goes back to ANC decisions," Minister of Justice Dullah Omar says in an interview. "When the National Executive Committee of the ANC discussed what had happened in the country, and in particular what happened in ANC training camps like Quatro, there was a strong feeling that some mechanism must be found to deal with all violations in a way which would ensure that we put our country on a sound moral basis. And so a view developed that what South Africa needs is a mechanism which would open up the truth for public scrutiny. But to humanize our society we had to put across the idea of moral responsibility—that is why I suggested a combination of the amnesty process with the process of victims' stories."

Victims, and not perpetrators, should be the beginning, the focus, and the central point of the legislation, the ANC argues. Victims should have several points of entry into the process. Should losses be categorized? So many ran for an arm, so many for a leg, and so many for a life? Should compensation be available immediately or should the government wait for a coherent assessment?

Every discussion opens up new problem areas. Amnesty takes away the victim's right to a civil claim. Does compensation make amnesty constitutional? What about the state? Should the state sue for amnesty? Because victims who receive compensation could still decide to sue the state.

The Democratic Party also wants to shift a date: the starting date of the period the commission is mandated to consider. The workload is impossible, says Dene Smuts. This is the first Truth Commission required to investigate nearly four decades, and to look not only at disappearances, as in Chile, but at other gross violations such as murder, kidnapping, torture, and severe ill-treatment. Not only would a starting date of June 16, 1976, shorten the commission's area of research by sixteen years, but it would have symbolic resonance, because it ushered in the famous cycle of resistance against oppression.

But as possible scenarios are spelled out and the pressure mounts to finish the legislation, the parties start to work on one another's nerves. National Party member Sheila Camerer has the energetic chairperson collapsing onto his forearms, muttering next to the microphone: "*Ag, God help my, the woman is driving me out of my mind!*"

Between Johnny de Lange and the National Party's Jacko Maree there is nothing but total war. The solidly built chairperson with his working-class Afrikaner background and the skinny-looking Maree with his bow tie and delicate spectacles cannot stand each other. The moment Maree opens his mouth the chair's facial color intensifies a shade.

One morning a note is sent to the media: "Don't leave too soon—promise to provide you with a report and an underhand ANC deal."

That someone has already shouted "Fire!" is clear the moment the room suddenly fills up with ANC faces never seen on the committee before. An unexpected extra National Party member also appears. The two parties are gearing up for a fight.

And it happens. Mr. De Lange says members should vote on the shifting of two other motions to the top of the agenda. Mr. Maree interrupts him. He would like three minutes to explain his request that the indemnity given to ANC members by the Currin Commission be discussed first. De Lange refuses. He is interrupted again. By NP member Danie Schutte, also asking for time to motivate Maree's request.

De Lange refuses again. Red in the face by now. He is the chair, he says, and this is his ruling. Mr. Maree is not satisfied, he can go and complain to the highest authorities. As chairperson, he is not going to allow Mr. Maree to turn the Justice Portfolio Committee into a media spectacle. "You can make clowns of other people, but not of me, the chairperson."

"Please, Mr. Chairman," pleads Inkatha Freedom Party member Koos van der Merwe, "do not let the poison between you and Mr. Maree destroy the good relations the rest of us have built up over the year. Can't you resolve this in any other way?"

Maree thrashes around in his chair, his hand raised. In his other hand, he is waving a thick pile of documents, representing 100 ANC members who, he says, were stealthily granted indemnity just before Christmas by the Currin Commission.

De Lange is adamant. "We still have eight draft bills to discuss. We argued this agenda last week for more than an hour. We have accepted it. I will allow no discussion. I am putting it to the vote. Read my lips: I am putting it to the vote."

Whereupon the ANC outvotes the other parties by fifteen to seven. As Maree storms out, Koos van der Merwe mutters: "The heavy hammer of democracy . . ."

But the rush to finish the bill has to take a backseat for a day or two.

"A blink and a wink—and it was all over," I report on that afternoon's current affairs program. "After weeks of publicity—peaking this morning in a hysteria of upper-class British accents in the corridors of Parliament—the queen came, and saw, and left."

As always, the Cape knows when to behave herself. The southeaster meekly calms down, the sweepers sweep up the last bits of paper, the pupils line the streets, and the red carpet bleeds down the steps. Inside the Assembly Hall, the atmosphere is predominantly that of . . . how shall one put it? .

dressing up for the queen. An opportunity to show off your traditional dress, your designer contact and your gravy-train menu.

Either shiny African-print dresses with puffed-up angel wings for sleeves, or shimmering Indian robes streaming over the shoulders, or a traditional beaded apron rounded off by the most massive flesh-colored Maidenform bra ever seen in the houses of Parliament. One of the visitors from the Free State seems to be hiding in some purple and gold shrubbery; another one from Stellenbosch wears a *potjie* like our own Johanna van Arkel. Two Hare Krishnas chant Queen Elizabeth II into the foyer with stained muslin pockets on their bare breasts.

The men, of course, are wearing traditional male dress: the expensive woolen suit, the loud tie, the gold-framed glasses, and the indispensable thick neck.

Then they enter.

In front walks the colored sergeant at arms carrying Parliament's golden traditional weapon in his white gloves. Then follows the black Black Rod—yes, for all these years, Parliament had a white Black Rod . . . but the times they are a-changin' . . .

The media have been fighting for weeks for the best seats in the press gallery. I stretch my neck. Blink my eyes.

Can it be true? She looks like anybody's auntie, complete with a clasp handbag and thick little shoes from an upmarket department store. Under any other circumstances, the brooch on her left shoulder could only be a fake, but we know, oh yes, we know, it is realer than real. She clips open her handbag, takes out her glasses, and puts her speech on the speaker's desk.

She speeches.

Can it be true? It sounds like something one would find at any small-town women's society meeting. Typed out on ordinary notepaper, one paragraph per page. With her gloves, she battles like other mortals to fold the pages into dog-ears to turn them more easily.

But don't be mistaken, the content may be ordinary, but it is delivered in the Accent that has intimidated half the earth for centuries. When last did Parliament hear the phrase "dough champion"?

Then she folds up her speech, puts it in her handbag, and off she goes.

With bags flying, we ambush a taxi passing the gates of Parliament—"we" means the editor and myself.

"Go!" shouts the editor. "To the waterfront, to the Britannia!" We turn our bags inside out, pull down zips, rip open blouses—the taxi driver looks panicky.

"Go!" I yell. "We meet the queen in seven minutes."

“Watter queen?” He sounds skeptical.

“Princess Di’s *skoonma*, but you must fly.”

He turns right round in his seat: “We are talking about the queen, the one with”—he touches his head—“*our* diamond in her crown? The one who wears lead in her seams?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” I yell in a strangled voice.

But nothing escapes my *op-en-wakker* editor: “Why lead?”

“So that the wind cannot blow her dress above her knees,” says the taxi driver smartly.

He grabs the steering wheel as if possessed. He has a mission. He has a skill. He wants us to be on time. We scour bends; we cut corners. The man drives like a demon.

He asks sternly, “Why are you late?”

“Because,” the editor shouts while dialing on her cell phone with one hand and fastening an earring with the other, “we had to report on the queen’s speech in Parliament, to two hundred news bulletins and in eleven languages, and now she has invited some journalists for cocktails on her yacht . . .”

“And what did she say in Parliament?” he asks.

“Nothing . . .”

Our legs shoot past him in new charcoal pantyhose.

“So what did you report?”

In the heap of rubble on the backseat, we dig up prehistoric lipsticks, rouge that needs quarrying with fingernails, mascara brushes clogged with gravel, empty perfume bottles, buckled bangles—and apply them all, to the tune of howling tires and a racing engine.

“We asked how such mediocrity could stay so luxuriously swaddled. We said to live like her you need to plunder your own people for centuries and thereafter suck half the world dry.”

The taxi driver races down the jetty and skids to an impressive stop just behind a group of Solemn Male Political Analysts in Deep Conversation, fondling their old school ties.

We tumble out. We have made it.

On the deck of the *Britannia*, our names are called out with the proverbial imaginary roll of a drum; our ordinary names are treated with the Accent: “Rrrina Smithhh: Afrrikaans Stereo!” And one walks up and puts one’s hand in the white glove. (“And how did it feel?” my friends ask afterward. I can’t remember; my eyes were nailed to the seam of the queen’s chirpy yellow dress.)

A man walks up to us. He is the spokesperson for the palace. He says the queen will move from

group to group. He says we will speak only when addressed. He says no one will ask her any question. He says we will not report on this friendly royal gesture.

The gin and tonic is deadly accurate. Next to the railings, I become drunker and drunker. A sailor with a lot of golden rope on his shoulders tells me the problems of sailing the *Britannia* so that the Queen could arrive in South Africa *twice*. Unofficially by plane, the first time; then helicoptered to the *Britannia* for the official arrival—the second coming—sailing under a rousing twenty-one-gun salute into the harbor. During all this, his mustache never moves. Not once.

General Constand Viljoen of the Freedom Front asks the queen to visit the Women's Memorial in Bloemfontein and to apologize to Afrikaners for what was done to them in the name of the British. But her schedule is already full.

The Justice Portfolio Committee spent 6½ hours on the Truth Commission Bill before any public submission was made. It listened for more than 20 hours to submissions, and it discussed, compiled, and drafted the various clauses of the bill in 100 hours and 53 minutes. Many a time, the civil servants turned up at the meeting with red eyes and wrinkled clothes, having worked through the night to prepare a new discussion document. All told, the committee spent 127 hours and 30 minutes on the Truth Commission Bill.

Eventually the legislation to establish the Truth Commission is introduced in the National Assembly. Over time it has earned different descriptions. It is regarded as the most sensitive, technical, complex, controversial, and important legislation ever to be passed by Parliament. It is also called the Mother of All Laws. For the occasion, the visitors' gallery is packed with schoolchildren and—so the speculation goes—possible candidates for the commission.

Just as it did in the committee, the discussion of the bill quickly turns into an emotional spectacle. After a sedate plea by President Nelson Mandela not to use the Truth Commission to score political points, the theme of injustice incites speakers to oratorical heights.

Everybody has a story to tell—from members of Parliament whose houses were firebombed, friends' children whose fingers were put in a coffee grinder, to criminals already walking the streets while right-wingers languish in jail. Most of the speeches are in Afrikaans. It is with this group, in that language, that they want to wrestle it out.

A journalist from one of the Afrikaans newspapers, *Beeld*, reminds me: "Do you remember that the finalizing of the legislation by the core committee was done in Afrikaans?" I frown. "It was Johnny de Lange as chair, Willie Hofmeyr from the ANC, Dene Smuts of the DP, Koos van der Merwe of the IFP, Danie Schutte for the NP, and Corné Mulder for the Freedom Front. I like it," he says, "those responsible for the past working to rectify it."

It is late afternoon when Johnny de Lange concludes the debate. What makes this piece of legislation so unique, he says, is that it really is a patchwork of all the viewpoints of the country. You can point out a Dene Smuts clause, a Danie Schutte clause, a Lawyers for Human Rights clause, a victim clause, a police clause—and for this all of us should proudly take credit." All but Jacko Maree says De Lange, who used the committee discussions only to get cheap publicity.

Then it is time to vote. All those *for* the legislation should put their cards in the slots in front of them and push the buttons.

Everybody does it.

“Something is wrong,” says the Speaker. All cards to be taken out. Put back in.

It seems the electric current that has to register the cards isn’t working. The Speaker asks members to wait a few minutes.

Finally, the Speaker asks those members in favor of the legislation to put up their hands in the old-fashioned way to be counted—those who say yea (African National Congress, National Party, and Pan Africanist Congress) and those who say nay (Freedom Front). The Inkatha Freedom Party abstains.

Then the legislation flails around for some time in the Senate. To prove that they are not mere rubber stamps of the Assembly, the senators insist on some changes. They want two non-South Africans on the commission; they want blanket amnesty to be discussed.

Through clenched jaws, the civil service law-writer hisses: “It’s a web of a law—a *moerse web*. If you change anything, you have to change every single clause.”

It is Dullah Omar’s task to get the legislation passed by the Senate. When a colored National Party member tells how he was tortured and hung upside down by the security police, ANC members shout him down. Crying, he relates how he was repeatedly thrown on the cement floor. Amid raucous laughter, an ANC member shouts, “That’s where you got your brain damage from.”

Omar stands up. “We can make a distinction among perpetrators, but I hope this law will teach us that all that we cannot make any distinction among victims.”

At last the legislation finds its way to the Department of Justice in a building previously known as the Verwoerd Building. A building where most of the civil servants are white and speak Afrikaans. And those blonde ones with the orange-peel nails—you can’t find better secretaries, a deputy minister confides—it is they who process the legislation. And it is the middle-aged Afrikaner men with the slumping shoulders, making bitter jokes in the elevators . . . “See you later?” “*Ja, God—and the Constitution—willing*” . . . who get it to the minister, the president, and the printers.

The Truth Commission Bill was signed into law by President Nelson Mandela on July 19, 1995.

They come for breakfast—my two brothers. Laugh, talk, eat, and dismiss the night before as just another normal night. Their politics, I notice, are still moderate National Party.

“Who fired the shots?” I ask. But I know Andries is one of the best shots in the district.

They explain. Every week before full moon and every week afterward, they patrol the farm. Since the 1994 election, they have caught more thieves than the whole stock-theft unit of the Kroonstad police. Andries usually drives the bakkie. Hendrik stands at the back with the spotlight. The moment they see the thieves, they switch on the light.

“Then we shout: ‘*Staan of ons skiet!*’ [‘Stop or we’ll shoot!’] Or something in Sesotho,” says Andries. “But at this point, you are full of sickening fears. The greatest fear is that the thief is armed that he will shoot unexpectedly; then you also fear the moment they decide to split and one runs for the farmhouse and the other to loot. Most of the time, they don’t stop when you warn them.”

It is quiet in the dining room. “But the moment they run away . . . it is then that I am overcome by an indescribable cold fury . . . He who is trespassing and breaking the law—by running away, forcing me to shoot him—he is forcing me to point a gun at another human being and to pull the trigger . . . and I hate him for that.

“First I try to shoot into the ground next to him. If he’s close to a mealie patch where I won’t be able to find him, I try to wound him in the legs . . . all the time petrified that I might kill him and then have to live with it, deal with it for the rest of my bloody life . . .”

Hendrik adds: “But the worst is that they don’t think Andries is deliberately trying to miss them. Several of them told us that Andries *couldn’t* hit them because their *muti* was too strong!”

“What do the police say?”

“Man, the moment the police come, all is well for them—they go to the police station, tomorrow they get bail . . . Most of the time, they get a suspended sentence. You leave the court together. Or on your way home, you pass them on the road. I told the magistrate it is not the value of the things they steal, it is the value of my life they steal, the value of my farm, the value of my future plans, the value of my peace of mind . . .”

In one of the first Afrikaans novels written by a black man, two black vagabonds murder a Jewish shop-owner. When someone squeals on the murderers, the main character condemns the stool pigeon. I drive up to interview the author.

“Why does your main character condemn the splitter and not the murderers?”

“Because black people must always stick together.”

“But the woman who saw a white man running away from Chris Hani’s dead body didn’t say, ‘He was white, so I’ll shut up.’ She said, ‘The deed is wrong, so I’ll speak out.’”

He looks at me. “No one can destroy whites—they have survival in their bones. But for us, if we don’t stand together no matter what, we’ll be wiped out.”

Hendrik touches the knuckles of his right hand lightly. They are swollen. “Do you hit them?” I ask numb.

Hendrik nods. “At some stage, we realized we were catching the same thieves over and over again and we thought we had to do something, so that if they want to steal, they’ll decide to steal on another farm except this one.”

My brothers tell me that stock theft on the farm has increased fivefold since the election.

“How long will you be able to take this?” I ask Andries.

My brother shakes his head. “I don’t know. I become aware of things in myself that I never knew were in me . . .”

“Like what?”

“Like feeling daily how my family and I become brutalized . . . like knowing that I am able to kill someone with my bare hands . . . I am learning to fight, to kill, to hate. And we have nowhere to turn. Some years ago, we could pick up the phone and talk to the highest power in the country. Now my home town is run by a guy whose name I can’t even pronounce.”

“*Ja*, but it was always like that for millions of black people.”

“Exactly . . . I thought what was coming was a new dispensation for all . . . what I see now is the brutalization of ordinary people that was previously confined to the townships is not disappearing but instead spilling over the rest of the country.” He stops, but then flings it out: “When Mandela was talking about white and black morality, how whites only care when whites die, he should have added blacks don’t care if whites die . . . but what is worse, they also don’t care if blacks die.”

My last free weekend before the Truth Commission starts its hearings in the eastern Cape. Mondli Shabalala picks me up on the farm on his way to Johannesburg. Mondli is a colleague of mine at the South African Broadcasting Corporation.

“Mondli, Moshoeshe’s name means ‘He who can steal as swiftly and silently as cutting someone’s beard.’ How can the deftness of stealing be a mark of honor? Why did Dingane ask Retief to steal back the cattle stolen by Sekonyela?² Why would Mandela write in his biography about the cattle he and his cousin stole from his uncle? Do we understand the same thing when we talk about stealing?”

Mondli is silent for a long time. Then he says, “I don’t know. But what I do know is that I grew up with the notion that stealing from whites is actually not stealing. Way back, Africans had no concept of stealing other than taking cattle as a means of contesting power. But you whiteys came and accused us of stealing—while at that very same minute you were stealing everything from us!”

I remember how my parents and I sat the whole Sunday behind closed doors. How we stopped talking when the dogs barked. “They prefer to come on Sundays . . . when they think you are at church,” my mother said. Later, when I left for Johannesburg, I looked back to wave and I saw the dog standing in front of the sandstone house of my youth. And as we drove out, my father locked the gate and turned the dogs loose.

CHAPTER TWO

None More Parted Than Us

A workshop is organized for journalists who will be covering the Truth Commission and the immediate editors. We are surrounded by German, Dutch, and Chilean journalists especially. More conspicuous even: only two black journalists—one from radio and one from the *Sowetan*. How are we to understand the absence of black journalists at everything related to the Truth Commission?

During the standard “I am so-and-so” introductory session, a German journalist says: “I think that South Africa is still too traumatized to really look at its past—you are still figuring out whether you have survived it, whether your economy is intact, whether you are going to make it.” It soon becomes clear that overseas journalists are interested only in the amnesty-seekers and whether there will be important politicians among them.

Various topics are discussed: Why should the commission be reported? How will emotional exhaustion be prevented? How can viewers, listeners, and readers be involved? Should Truth Commission stories be confined to a special page? Won’t people just skip over this section? How can we see to it that the past becomes front-page news? No newspaper has the means to cover the commission full-time—will television be able to broadcast the hearings daily so that people can follow them from their offices?

What is the role of radio with its access to all the language groups and impoverished communities? And do all eleven official languages have the words needed to cover the commission? A Zulu-speaking colleague loses his temper: “Of course! And if the words aren’t there, we’ll make them up. Make them up? He provides a list:

ambush: *lalela unyendale*—lying down waiting to do an evil act

hit squad: *abasocong*i—neck-twisters

massacre: *isibhicongo*—crushed down

politics: *ezombusazwe*—matters about the ruling of the land

right-winger: *untamo-lukhuni*—stiff-necked

serial killer: *umbulali onequngu*—addicted killer

third force: ³ *ingal’ enoboya*—a hairy arm

“Hairy arm?” I ask.

“During third force activities,” he explains, “people said a cuff sometimes moved too high up, and the exposed arm was always hairy—that means belonging to a white man.”

By late afternoon, we are discussing how you keep your own past out of your reporting. The journalist from the *Sowetan* stands up: “My newspaper’s position is that it has actually always done

TRC-type stories and will not make any special effort now to cover the commission.”

Willem Pretorius of *Beeld* is on his feet. “In the army, I was sent to cut off Radio Freedom’s cables and take them off the air. What does that make me? Can I—or can I not—report on the Truth Commission?”

It is suddenly very quiet. After a day of journalistic clichés, we’ve struck an artery.

“I was a political journalist at the old SABC—it was I who would remove the voice of someone like Archbishop Tutu from reports and insert sinister background music,” says an ex-South African who now works in America. “I was eventually fired for my left-wing political views . . . what does that make me?”

A well-known English-speaking editor gets up with a sigh. “Really. This is so unnecessary. We have worked for years and years to get the Afrikaner on board. And now we are working on the black editors . . . Experience has taught me that this kind of talk gets one nowhere. Nowhere at all.”

Someone struggles up behind me. It’s veteran journalist Hennie Serfontein, holding the microphone, beard and hands shaking so much I’m afraid he’s having a heart attack. He stutters and gasps. “Everyone here is putting their past on the table, but you . . . your . . . getting-on-board!” He shouts. “My God, *julle Engelse* . . . whose *bleddie* board?” Hennie is on a roll, taking on the English press: dates, incidents, how information was changed by specific editors, how headlines were manipulated to suit the politics of the Nationalist rulers. He has the date; he has the names of the white English-speaking editors and businessmen who went to see P. W. Botha⁴ with a blank check and said: “Demand of us what you will, but protect our interests.”

Some journalists jump up and protest that they weren’t even born yet when this happened; others loudly encourage Hennie. A black journalist walks out: the Anglo-Boer War all over again. The workshop ends in chaos. Only the adjournment for drinks and snacks restores some semblance of respectability.

On the way back from the workshop, my mind is swirling. Waiting at some traffic lights, I see a group of workers protesting outside an old-age home. Their strike action was front-page news this morning. One of them carries a placard: “Away with Jews.”

Is it possible that a commission could find itself clinging to a morality that is respected nowhere else in the country?

And the idea of truth. Even if it’s not spelled with a capital . . . Nadine Gordimer once asked a black writer: “Why do you always picture a white woman lounging next to a swimming pool? We are not all like that!” He replied: “Because we perceive you like that.” Gordimer admits that she has to take cognizance of that truth.

One morning, when I was still a lecturer at a training college for black teachers, a young comrade arrived. He refused to enter my class. He called Afrikaans a colonial language. “What is English then?” I asked. “English was born in the center of Africa,” he said with great conviction. “It was

brought here by Umkhonto we Sizwe.” That was his truth. And I, as his teacher, had to deal with the truth that was shaping his life, his viewpoints, his actions.

Will a commission be sensitive to the word “truth”?

If its interest in truth is linked only to amnesty and compensation, then it will have chosen not truth but justice. If it sees truth as the widest possible compilation of people’s perceptions, stories, myths and experiences, it will have chosen to restore memory and foster a new humanity, and perhaps that justice in its deepest sense.

According to the law, the president must appoint the seventeen wise men and women who will serve on the commission in consultation with the Cabinet. The commissioners must be highly regarded in the community and must not have a high political profile.

There are various ways of proceeding, each likely to bring new names to the fore. First, the president could compile his own list and then discuss it with Cabinet. Second, the president and Cabinet could compile a list together—bringing in the obvious danger of political horse-trading. Third, candidates could be nominated by nongovernmental organizations, churches, and parties, and interviewed in public by a panel. Then the president and Cabinet could choose from a short list. The advantage of the last option is that political participation would be minimal, and there would be little opportunity to plant on the commission someone tasked with undermining its work. Public hearings would also rekindle interest in the commission, which has died down as the drafting of the legislation turned into a political fight.

The third option is chosen.

The president appoints a panel that includes Professor Fink Haysom, Jody Kollapen, Jayend Naidoo, Baleka Kgositsile, Professor Harriet Ngubane, Senator Rossier de Ville, and Bishop Peter Storey.

The public hearings start on the morning of November 13 in the Good Hope Centre in Cape Town. There are forty-six nominations on the list. The first to appear are Professor H. W. van der Merwe, Glenda Wildschut, Dominee Murray Coetzee, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

The questions follow a set pattern. What kind of people should serve on the commission? What kind of contribution can the candidate bring to the process of reconciliation and truth? “I’m looking for someone who paid a price for his beliefs,” says panel member Peter Storey, the Methodist bishop.

But it is Archbishop Desmond Tutu who has the panel eating out of his hand within moments.

“What should one call you?” asks Professor Ngubane. “Wouldn’t people find you intimidating? Here I am and I don’t know whether I should say ‘Your Highness’ or ‘Father’ or ‘Bishop’ . . .”

“You can call me anything as long as you don’t call me ‘Your Graciousness,’ ” he laughs. “No, don’t think I intimidate people, I hope they think I’m fun.”

What kind of people would he like to see on the commission?

“People who once were victims. The most forgiving people I have ever come across are people who have suffered—it is as if suffering has ripped them open into empathy. I am talking about wounded healers. A commissioner should be buttressed by spiritual life.”

Tutu is asked to react to a remark made by General Tienie Groenewald: “I confess to God, not to Tutu.”

“*Jong*, if you’ve had a fight with your wife, it is no use you only ask forgiveness of God. You will have to say to your wife you are sorry. The past has not only contaminated our relationship with God but the relationship between people as well. And you will have to ask forgiveness of the representatives of those communities that you’ve hurt.”

Most of the candidates are clearly conscious that they may face political pressure and that they will be walking a tightrope between victims and perpetrators. Van der Merwe says that punishment is an inherent part of the moral and legal codes of this country and perhaps one should regard the transparent and open process of the commission as already a kind of punitive method. If Magnus Malan, our former minister of defense, says he feels humiliated after being charged in court for a massacre in KwaZulu-Natal, that is already a form of retribution.

All the women are asked whether they feel there should be women on the commission. No man is asked whether he feels there should be women on the commission. Nobody is asked whether they feel there should be men on the commission.

Glenda Wildschut says people should feel comfortable when they appear before the commission. If a woman had to appear before men only, or a black person before whites only, then people would not feel at ease. How the commission is going to listen to people will determine how acceptable it will be to the majority.

Mary Burton says the beneficiaries of the past system will be prepared to contribute compensation only if they experience a complete change of heart, and that can happen only when people have information about the past.

Hlengiwe Mkhize reminds the panel that African culture has its own rituals of reconciliation and needn’t depend solely on the Christian terminology of confession and forgiveness. Another candidate talks about the “*ilala*”—a grass blade milked for palm wine. When two people have had a fight, they sit opposite each other milking this blade while they confess. “The emptier the blade becomes, the emptier the heart of anger.”

“Will you be able to bring right-wing Afrikaners on board?” Advocate Chris de Jager is asked.

“Don’t appoint me to the commission as a token Afrikaner,” De Jager says. “And if the commission becomes a witch-hunt, I want to warn you beforehand—I’m a pathetic hunter.”

Alex Boraine underlines the importance of effective administration. If the three committees, the staff, the publicity, the financial administration, do not function efficiently, the commission need not even start its work. Not only will it become an international embarrassment, but the victims will be failed once more. The commission will have to find its way in uncharted territory. He also warns

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