

Atonement

I had just about enough time to return the rented car and catch my flight. Familiar with the roads around Johannesburg as I had returned several times in the past few years, I headed south down the N3, saw the approach to the R24East, and made a comfortable turn left, heading to Johannesburg International Airport. *Keep left, keep left*, I told myself. *This isn't Europe. You could wander off to Durban if you don't keep your wits about you.* I hugged left but quickly realized that complete left was now taking me onto Edenvale Road – not where I wanted to go.

I did what anyone would do in a similar situation, simply made a correction and crossed back onto the freeway. It was just as I was making this minor navigational adjustment that I noticed what appeared to be a black security guard waving and dancing in the middle of the road. He reminded me of one of those Zulu dancers I had seen once when my parents took us on a holiday to Durban; comical, yet faintly warlike.

“Idiot,” I said as I swerved and raced past him onto the freeway. I glanced in my side mirror to make sure the Zulu warrior wasn't dead and it then occurred to me that

he was not a security guard. He was not a Zulu dancer. He was a traffic policeman frantically signaling me to pull over. I dutifully slowed down and stopped the car. He had a long walk to reach me. It must have been two hundred meters at least. He left his partner in the vehicle and took a leisurely walk up to my car. While he ambled up the road, I pondered the situation. It's a strange thing, returning to South Africa. I live in another country, in another reality, almost in another lifetime and yet so much is still familiar: the lexicon, the mannerisms. It's the country of my birth and remains the landscape of my dreams. You're a foreigner and you are not quite foreign. It's like layers of etchings that see light from time to time. Over the last few years it has been enthralling to see the astounding social, cultural and political changes. And so, another etched layer begins to form. I clicked the button and the window slid open.

"Good afternoon, officer," I said jovially, expecting the worst.

A congenial dark face peered through the window frame. He had a grey mustache and looked about my age. He saw straight off that I was not local.

"Where you from?" he asked.

"I'm a tourist," I said. "Israel. Ever been to Jerusalem?" I asked, hoping to evoke some religious empathy. "Is there some problem?"

"You know, you have committed a serious traffic offence," he said.

Now where I come from, there is a standard method for handling such a situation:

Stage 1. Act as if you are a foreigner and understand nothing. Stage 2. Plead complete innocence and no un-

derstanding of what the offence could possibly have been while saying the word “officer” frequently. Stage 3. As he takes his pen out to write up the ticket, plead and beg and suggest that it will never happen again. At this point, if you are female under thirty with a low cut blouse, you may get away with a warning. However, if you are a male above fifty you will certainly be in for a fine. Such is the reality of the Levant. At this point you move on to Stage 4 which could never occur in the old South Africa as I knew it. You tell the offending policeman that he has made a serious error, ask him for his personal details, and tell him you will see him in court. Stage 5. He hands you the ticket, shaking his head. You grab it, knowing you will pay dearly but at least you feel better.

In any event, I was only at Stage 2 – pleading complete innocence or knowledge about what the crime might be.

“You crossed a white line,” he said.

I considered the irony of it all for a moment and said, “Is that an offence, officer?”

“Ahyeees,” he said, stressing the e part for longer than necessary. “That’s a 500 rand fine.”

We were at Stage 3. The pen was out. He looked at my license. The form had yet to be filled in.

He leaned on the window frame. “Morris,” he said as he looked at the license, mistaking my middle name for my last name. He smiled at me.

“That seems like a lot of money for such an offence,” I said.

“Morris,” he paused. “I think I have to give you some fine,” he said.

Some fine? What does that mean? I thought. I opened my wallet to insert the license which he had handed back

and he glanced briefly at the wad of one hundred rand notes stuffed in the partition. It was clear that Stage 3 was going to play out differently from anything I had previously encountered, but I was already in flashback.

It's one of my earliest memories, certainly my first memory of the South African Police Service. I believe I must have been doing all in my power to irritate my sister Judith. We were both sitting in the back of our Morris Minor. My mother was driving down Main Street, Hermanus, when Judith said, "Mom, there's van Zyl, the policeman, and he looks like he's telling you to pull over." Judith turned to me, "You see what happens when little boys are naughty?" It was her moment to torment me.

"What happens?" I asked.

"The policeman will come and put you in *chookie*," she said.

"What's chookie?" I asked.

"Chookie is jail," said my mother, who apparently had also had enough of my misbehavior.

"Yes, you will be locked up and punished like all naughty boys," said Judith gleefully as she realized I might fall for this. I looked out the window. The policeman was indeed walking towards the car. He was a giant of a man. Blue uniform, socks with garters held up tightly below the knees. A stern face was half hidden by a peaked cap. He had a polished brown leather belt on one side of which was strapped a large gleaming black pistol in a holster. The other side had a holder for a nasty leather-covered baton. Van Zyl walked towards us with the leather stick in his right hand, tapping it repeatedly into his left. Between the socks and the shorts, his thick sickly white legs

and knees protruded, covered with curled ginger hairs. It was the hairs that sent a shudder of fear right through my bones.

I plastered myself onto the floor of the car, trying desperately to avoid chookie. My bum was inevitably raised above the gearbox and Judith casually tapped her feet on both cheeks of my buttocks, knowing I dared not say a word. Van Zyl peered through the window.

“Good afternoon, officer,” my mother said.

He replied curtly in Afrikaans and then said,

“You didn’t stop dead at the stop street.” There seemed to be a definite emphasis on the “dead” part.

“I’m a very cautious driver,” my mother said.

“Ja, with that lot going wild at the back, you should be,” he replied. I assume he was looking at the child rolling on the floor of the car and the girl pummeling her feet into his buttocks.

“I’m going to let you off this time. On your way now!”

Later that night, my mother related the events of the day to my father. Interested in the adult discourse I stood just behind the entrance to the living room as I often did when my parents thought I was asleep. Here was where the real facts came out. I figured I might get more input on chookie.

“What, van Zyl stopped you, just like that, for nothing at all?”

“Yes – claimed I didn’t stop, which is nonsense.”

“Bastard,” said Dad.

“After what he did to that poor boy,” Mom said, “and now he gets away scot free and thinks he can do anything in this town.”

I was more distressed than ever. What boy were they talking about? What did the boy do? Did van Zyl put a naughty boy in chookie? I ran back to the bedroom. Judith was reading but I had to disturb her. I had to ask her about what I had heard.

“Judy, Judy!” What did van Zyl do to a boy? What does scot free mean?”

“You’ve been listening in on Mom and Dad again, hey? Ok, I’ll tell you, but you promise not to say a word.”

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” I said.

“We’re Jews, man,” she said. “We don’t cross our hearts. I will show you how to draw a *mogen dovid* tomorrow, OK?” she said, trying to distract me, but I wouldn’t let up. “Alright, alright, I’ll tell you. Van Zyl arrested a native boy. He was sixteen. Then he shot him.”

“Shot him?” I was stunned. It was worse than I had imagined.

“Ja, he said he was a trouble maker and he had it coming to him anyway.”

“Can a policeman shoot anyone?” I asked.

“No, but van Zyl said the native was resisting arrest and so he shot him. Straight in the head – dead, just like that. The thing is, no one saw, so they just took his word for it. If it had been a white boy, maybe van Zyl would have been in chookie himself a long time ago,” she said. I was glad I wasn’t a native, but I resolved to stay clear of van Zyl, just for safety’s sake.

In 1960 it was probably considered quite appropriate, even in so called liberal circles, to talk of *natives*. Frequently though, the word used to denote black skinned people was *kaffir*, almost always uttered with gestures of

hatred, disrespect and fear. It was several years later that I was to discover how deep the schisms of our society really were.

I believe it was at the time I was in the second grade at school. The school was a “dual medium” school, only for white children, and classes were conducted in separate languages for Afrikaans and English speaking children though all the other activities were done together. The black people of our village lived completely separately in *locations*, the standard euphemism for impoverished black ghetto townships on the outskirts of town. This was the reality of our time for every city, town and village in South Africa. Occasionally a disheveled little boy or girl, usually with a snotty nose, would wander into the town, knock on our door and ask for a *stukkie brood*.

The school was by law for whites only, quite normative at the time. There was a child in our grade who clearly had a darker skin than the other children and features that distantly resembled the indigenous people of our country. He looked like he might be *Coloured* but clearly had been classified *European*. The children in his class called him *Korrelkop* as in, “Hey, Korrelkop, why are you here? You should be in your location with the other kaffirs.”

For the most part Korrelkop was considered a lower human being. He had brown skin and frizzy black hair. He would walk around by himself though he did have one friend, Martinus van der Spuy. They would eat their lunch of sandwiches together at the far end of the playground.

During recess at school, the children would often play soccer. These random games were not facilitated by any teachers and so the process was usually controlled by self

appointed team captains. These boys were not always the best soccer players, but were almost always bullies, known in the local jargon as *main okes*. They would choose players for their team, each in turn, during which time the rest of us would mill around hoping to be selected for the game. It always went from the best players to the worst. Finally the teams would go onto the field to play their game, and the few remaining stragglers would remain behind hoping to get a chance the next day. On one such day, the lineup for soccer began. Korrelkop and Martinus were both fairly good soccer players and I was expecting them both to be chosen. The teams were almost complete and grudgingly one of the main okes chose Korrelkop. I was expecting Martinus to be chosen next, but he wasn't.

"Why don't you take Martinus?" one of the boys asked his captain.

"Because he's a kaffirboetie and that's worse than a kaffir" was the answer.

The teams had been chosen. They ran off to play. The kaffirboetie went off to eat his sandwiches at the usual spot, this time all alone at one end of the playground.

"That's what happens to a kaffirboetie," someone said next to me.

"Yes, let him learn his lesson, kaffirboetie van der Spuy," said another.

It wasn't long after that, that I arrived home from school and I saw a little black boy sitting on our front wall. He may have been a child of one of the servants in the neighborhood, or possibly he had wandered out from the location. He didn't appear to be hungry and he had clean clothes, so he wasn't begging.

“Why are you on my wall?” I asked him. He looked at me and smiled. He had beautiful white teeth. “What’s your name?” I asked.

“James,” he said. Of course it wasn’t really James. All black people anglicized their names and often their children’s names so that white people could remember them. The maids all seemed to have the same names: Violet, Lena, Gladys, Emily. The gardeners’ names were easy to remember too. You had the disciples: John, Peter, Paul. Names of the week or the month were also common: Wednesday, October and so on.

“James,” I said “you must get off my wall and go home.”

“*Hamba*,” I said, which was the only word I knew in Xhosa which means “Go.”

He reluctantly climbed off the wall and ambled up the road. The next day, I arrived home and there was James, sitting on the front wall of our house dangling his legs. I walked past him, into our house. “Mom, there’s a *picannin* outside, and he won’t go home.” My mother sat down next to me and said, “Jayson, you can play with black children also.”

“But I don’t want to,” I replied.

My sister and I shared a room that looked over a veranda and onto the street. My father had recently bought me a chess set and had taught me the basic moves. It was a beautiful chess set, made of carved wood. I sat down at the table in my room and carefully placed the pieces on the board, but I had no one to play with. I gazed out the window. There was James, on the wall. He flashed a white toothed smile and waved. I gathered up the set and walked outside.

“Look, James, this is chess. Here let me show you.”

I was showing James how to place the pieces on the board when I noticed Annalie, my neighbour, who was walking home from school, turn into our road. If Annalie knew I was playing with a native, she would tell her friends. The whole school would know about it. I could hear them saying,

“Not only is he a *bladdy* Jew; he’s a kaffirboetie!” For kaffirboetie, you didn’t need to prefix the word with bladdy. Kaffirboetie was worse, far worse than bladdy. To complicate matters further, Annalie’s father was a policeman. If Annalie told him, maybe he would tell van Zyl. Then what?

“James, go home,” I said. I quickly gathered up the chess set.

“Why? What? We play?” he asked in his broken English.

“Just go – now!”

He looked and smiled. It was a friendly smile but it was filled with confusion and humiliation. He slid off the wall and walked away. When I saw Annalie later, she said,

“Hey, did you see that kaffir on your wall?”

“Ja” I said. “I told him to bugger off.”

“Just as well,” she said. “My pa hates them, hey. And my ma. And me too.”

But my mind did not rest. There was a lingering unease.

Fortunately I had a wonderful distraction. One of my uncles had brought me an old pellet gun. It was unusual in that it was actually a pistol made out of heavy black steel with a barrel bored specially for pellets. It even looked a

bit like van Zyl's gun. My father had actually dismantled the mechanism so it wouldn't shoot and had decided to hide it away in one of the antique drawers in the house. I knew where it was though and played with it out of the reach of my parents.

In the 60's there was no TV in South Africa. We read books and my mother and father told us stories, usually at bedtime. Sometimes they were Bible stories, like the one about Moses and the exodus from slavery. We were reading the Moses story one day and it became clear to me that Moses was helping his brethren, "us" the Jews, even when he was Prince of Egypt. I stopped my father in mid-sentence and said,

"Dad, was Moses a kind of a kaffirboetie?"

"Don't ever use that word, Jayson. That's a terrible thing to say. Moses was a leader who saw the oppression of his people and made a stand," he said.

The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that Moses was a kind of a kaffirboetie, a good one who became a hero.

We were approaching the High Holy days, the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement. As was common in our home, my father would sit with us and briefly explain the meaning of the holy days. I was young and couldn't quite comprehend the meaning of the event, so I turned for an explanation to the closest authority at hand, my sister Judith.

"Well, when you sin, then once a year you ask God for forgiveness. You see, between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, he fills in a book with everyone's name. On Yom

Kippur he signs it and decides whether you are going to be punished or rewarded and what will happen to you for a whole year.”

“But I don’t sin,” I said.

“Of course you sin, everyone does,” she said.

I thought about the time I ate pork *boerewors* at Annalie’s family *braai*, so I said, “Is it a sin to eat pork?”

“Yes, I think so. But the worst sin is when you do something bad to someone else,” she continued.

“So if you sin, how are you forgiven?” I asked.

“Well, you’re supposed to pray and on Yom Kippur you fast, and you can think about the sins you committed and make resolutions for the New Year.”

I had enough experience to know that praying in *shul* was a very long process. On Yom Kippur it took up the whole day during which time I would eventually wander out of the shul and play with my friends. Fasting did not appear as a realistic option, so I felt that I should concentrate on the resolution part of atonement if there was any hope of getting good marks from God in order to make it through the next year without any disaster befalling me.

“What’s a resolution?” I asked.

“You must think of what you did wrong and then decide to do something good in order to make it right.” End of lecture.

I felt bad about James. Since he’d left, I hadn’t seen him again. I made a resolution. I wanted to be a kaffirboetie, just like Moses. Lena, our maid, didn’t need me to be her kaffirboetie. I needed to find some black children. We could play and I could be their kaffirboetie, just so long as

Annalie or my friends at school didn't know.

At that time, Lena asked my mother if her sisters and their children could come and visit her at the house. Serious discussions took place between my mother and father due to their concern that pass laws might be contravened. If this occurred, the police could come to the house and arrest the staff, forcibly remove people, and transfer them to the Transkei or some other *homeland*. Finally, my parents allowed the gathering, but they were restricted to the back yard and the maid's room so that the neighbors wouldn't notice. Here was my moment, my test, my resolution and my atonement. I was going to be a kaffirboetie! Just like Moses.

The yard filled up with black children, impoverished boys and girls about my age. We played. I made a hopscotch game that I drew with chalk on the cement outside our house. We played for a while. As the fun of the hopscotch wore off, I had an idea.

"Let's play cowboys and crooks," I said. The children had never heard of the game.

"Look, I'll be the cowboy, you can be the crooks. I've got a gun!" I said.

I ran into the house and pulled the gun out of the antique drawer. I ran to the back stoep and brandished the weapon, pointing it in all directions. Suddenly, there were shrieks, wailing and moaning – in English, Afrikaans and Xhosa.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot us! Look he's got a real gun. Run! Run! Run!"

The yard emptied out in a second. The children ran into the maid's room or cowered behind the garage whim-

pering. I found myself standing on the stoep, quite alone, looking at the gun and saying, "It doesn't even shoot...it's just a game." But it was over. The yard was empty. No one wanted to play.

I was back on the R24East. The traffic policeman said,

"I can't just let you off."

"How much?" I asked.

"300 rand."

"300 rand is quite a lot," I said, thinking, *so now it's down from 500 rand to 300 rand.*

He smiled at me and leaned his elbows on the window frame. So this was a negotiation. Time was running out. I had to get that flight. I couldn't help but believe that this genial policeman was James. *We're the same age, I thought. I wonder what's happened to James these last few decades.* A strange conversation played out in my mind.

"Ja, Jayson, so things have changed around here, hey? You were so busy finding a life for yourself somewhere else, you didn't even think that I, a black man, could become a traffic cop. You thought I was some kind of low level security guard doing a Zulu dance in the road. You didn't even bother to stop back there."

"James, I'm sorry about what happened when we were children. I'm sorry we couldn't be friends, but you know what it was like back then."

"You were just like all the other white children – you had everything and you gave us nothing. I don't accuse you. You were just a child. But where were you when we needed people like you? You buggered off to Israel. You don't know what we went through here to make this change you see today. Jerusalem? What – you think that I am supposed

to stand back and say 'Praise the Lord'? While you were in Jerusalem, we were throwing stones for our freedom at policemen like van Zyl who shot children in the head."

"Look at me now," he continued "I have this uniform, I have my pride. My children go to school. In the end, we didn't even need white boys like you to teach us chess."

*"But James," I say, "then why are you asking me for this bribe? Look at what you're doing here, man. This is the crack in your great free New South Africa. **You** are the crack in the system. Don't ruin what you have achieved."*

"What? The white boy who was too scared to be called a kaffirboetie is now some kind of moral authority? Look pal, this is how we do things here. And anyway it's good for you too. You give me some cash. You catch your plane. I go home and take my children some presents. We're both happy. Don't forget, you're also a part of this. Now go home, and before you judge us, think about that wall your government is putting up so the Palestinians will find themselves in a Bantustan."

"How about 100 rand officer, is that OK?" I ask.

"Yes – that will do," he replies.

"And I pay you right here? Right?"

"No problem."

He took the note and slipped it into his pocket. "You have a good day now, hey!"

I drove off. As I approached the airport turnoff, I was careful not to cross any white lines. I boarded the plane with a new etching – a new layer of the South African experience. Now, let's see. What should I call it?

Smile, the beloved country, smile.