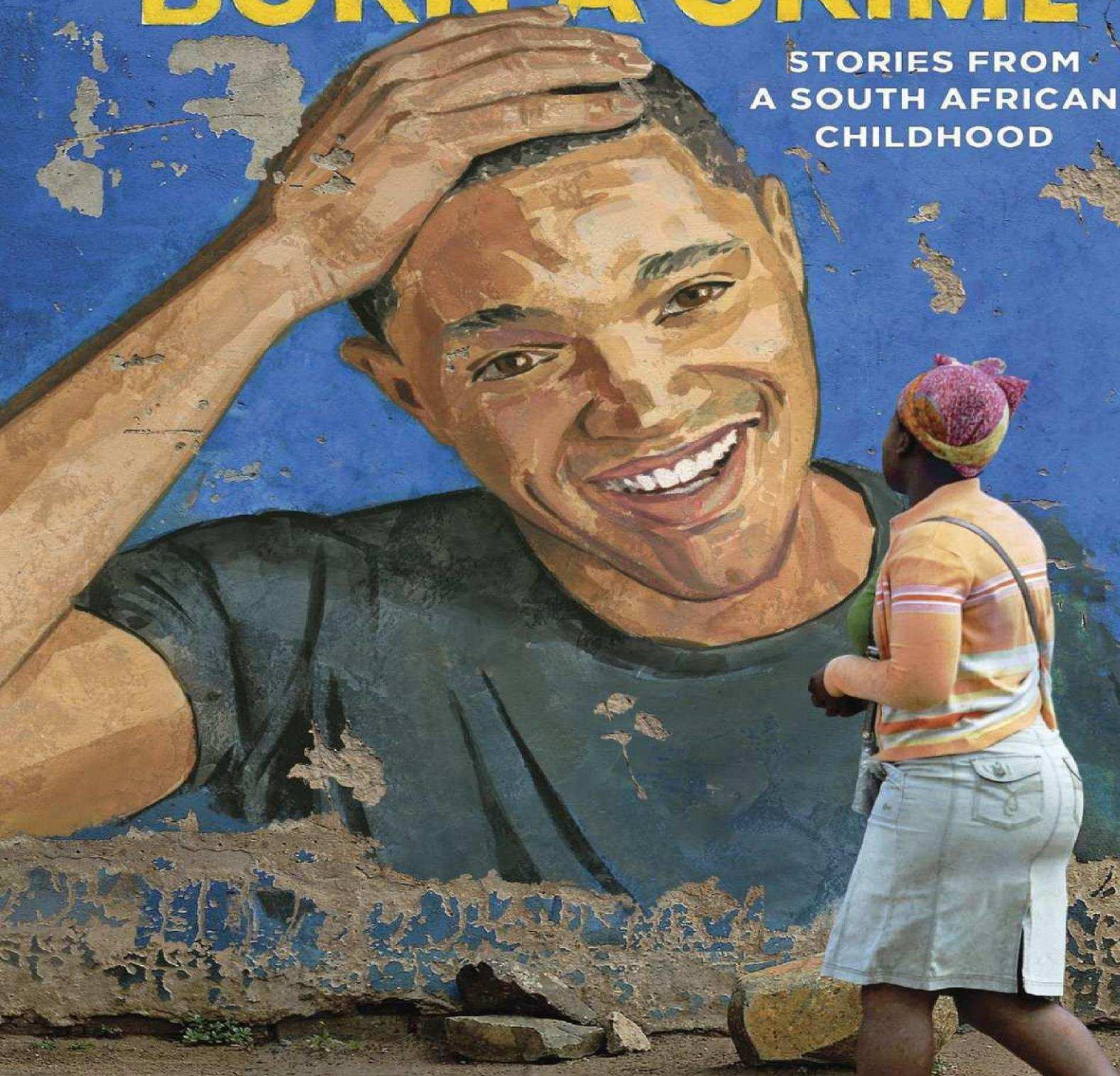


TREVOR NOAH

BORN A CRIME

STORIES FROM
A SOUTH AFRICAN
CHILDHOOD



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TREVOR NOAH



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IMMORALITY ACT, 1927

To prohibit illicit carnal intercourse between Europeans and natives and other acts in relation thereto.

BE IT ENACTED by the King's Most Excellent Majesty, the Senate and the House of Assembly of the Union of South Africa, as follows:—

1. Any European male who has illicit carnal intercourse with a native female, and any native male who has illicit carnal intercourse with a European female...shall be guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to imprisonment for a period not exceeding five years.
2. Any native female who permits any European male to have illicit carnal intercourse with her and any European female who permits any native male to have illicit carnal intercourse with her shall be guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to imprisonment for a period not exceeding four years....

PART I

The genius of apartheid was convincing people who were the overwhelming majority to turn on each other. Apart hate, is what it was. You separate people into groups and make them hate one another so you can run them all.

At the time, black South Africans outnumbered white South Africans nearly five to one, yet we were divided into different tribes with different languages: Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana, Sotho, Venda, Ndebele, Tsonga, Pedi, and more. Long before apartheid existed these tribal factions clashed and warred with one another. Then white rule used that animosity to divide and conquer. All nonwhites were systematically classified into various groups and subgroups. Then these groups were given differing levels of rights and privileges in order to keep them at odds.

Perhaps the starkest of these divisions was between South Africa's two dominant groups, the Zulu and the Xhosa. The Zulu man is known as the warrior. He is proud. He puts his head down and fights. When the colonial armies invaded, the Zulu charged into battle with nothing but spears and shields against men with guns. The Zulu were slaughtered by the thousands, but they never stopped fighting. The Xhosa, on the other hand, pride themselves on being the thinkers. My mother is Xhosa. Nelson Mandela was Xhosa. The Xhosa waged a long war against the white man as well, but after experiencing the futility of battle against a better-armed foe, many Xhosa chiefs took a more nimble approach. "These white people are here whether we like it or not," they said. "Let's see what tools they possess that can be useful to us. Instead of being resistant to English, let's learn English. We'll understand what the white man is saying, and we can force him to negotiate with us."

The Zulu went to war with the white man. The Xhosa played chess with the white man. For a long time neither was particularly successful, and each blamed the other for a problem neither had created. Bitterness festered. For decades those feelings were held in check by a common enemy. Then apartheid fell, Mandela walked free, and black South Africa went to war with itself.

Sometimes in big Hollywood movies they'll have these crazy chase scenes where somebody jumps or gets thrown from a moving car. The person hits the ground and rolls for a bit. Then they come to a stop and pop up and dust themselves off, like it was no big deal. Whenever I see that I think, *That's rubbish. Getting thrown out of a moving car hurts way worse than that.*

I was nine years old when my mother threw me out of a moving car. It happened on a Sunday. I know it was on a Sunday because we were coming home from church, and every Sunday in my childhood meant church. We *never* missed church. My mother was—and still is—a deeply religious woman. Very Christian. Like indigenous peoples around the world, black South Africans adopted the religion of our colonizers. By “adopt” I mean it was forced on us. The white man was quite stern with the native. “You need to pray to Jesus,” he said. “Jesus will save you.” To which the native replied, “Well, we do need to be saved—saved from *you*, but that’s beside the point. So let’s give this Jesus thing a shot.”

My whole family is religious, but where my mother was Team Jesus all the way, my grandmother balanced her Christian faith with the traditional Xhosa beliefs she’d grown up with, communicating with the spirits of our ancestors. For a long time I didn’t understand why so many black people had abandoned their indigenous faith for Christianity. But the more we went to church and the longer I sat in those pews the more I learned about how Christianity works: If you’re Native American and you pray to the wolves, you’re a savage. If you’re African and you pray to your ancestors, you’re a primitive. But when white people pray to a guy who turns water into wine, well, that’s just common sense.

My childhood involved church, or some form of church, at least four nights a week. Tuesday night was the prayer meeting. Wednesday night was Bible study. Thursday night was Youth church. Friday and Saturday we had off. (Time to sin!) Then on Sunday we went to church. Three churches, to be precise. The reason we went to three churches was because my mom said each church gave her something different. The first church offered jubilant praise of the Lord. The second church offered deep analysis of the scripture, which my mom loved. The third church offered passion and catharsis; it was a place where you truly felt the presence of the Holy Spirit inside you. Completely by coincidence, as we moved back and forth between these churches, I noticed that each one had its own distinct racial makeup: Jubilant church was mixed church. Analytical church was white church. And passionate, cathartic church, that was black church.

Mixed church was Rhema Bible Church. Rhema was one of those huge, supermodern, suburban megachurches. The pastor, Ray McCauley, was an ex-bodybuilder with a big smile and the personality of a cheerleader. Pastor Ray had competed in the 1974 Mr.

Universe competition. He placed third. The winner that year was Arnold Schwarzenegger. Every week, Ray would be up onstage working really hard to make Jesus cool. There was arena-style seating and a rock band jamming out with the latest Christian contemporary pop. Everyone sang along, and if you didn't know the words that was okay because they were all right up there on the Jumbotron for you. It was Christian karaoke, basically. I always had a blast at mixed church.

White church was Rosebank Union in Sandton, a very white and wealthy part of Johannesburg. I *loved* white church because I didn't actually have to go to the main service. My mom would go to that, and I would go to the youth side, to Sunday school. In Sunday school we got to read cool stories. Noah and the flood was obviously a favorite; I had a personal stake there. But I also loved the stories about Moses parting the Red Sea, David slaying Goliath, Jesus whipping the money changers in the temple.

I grew up in a home with very little exposure to popular culture. Boyz II Men were not allowed in my mother's house. Songs about some guy grinding on a girl all night long? No, no, no. That was forbidden. I'd hear the other kids at school singing "End of the Road," and I'd have no clue what was going on. I knew *of* these Boyz II Men, but I didn't really know who they were. The only music I knew was from church: soaring, uplifting songs praising Jesus. It was the same with movies. My mom didn't want my mind polluted by movies with sex and violence. So the Bible was my action movie. Samson was my superhero. He was my He-Man. A guy beating a thousand people to death with the jawbone of a donkey? That's pretty badass. Eventually you get to Paul writing letters to the Ephesians and it loses the plot, but the Old Testament and the Gospels? I could quote you anything from those pages, chapter and verse. There were Bible games and quizzes every week at white church, and I kicked everyone's ass.

Then there was black church. There was always some kind of black church service going on somewhere, and we tried them all. In the township, that typically meant an outdoor, tent-revival-style church. We usually went to my grandmother's church, an old-school Methodist congregation, five hundred African grannies in blue-and-white blouses, clutching their Bibles and patiently burning in the hot African sun. Black church was rough, I won't lie. No air-conditioning. No lyrics up on Jumbotrons. And it lasted forever, three or four hours at least, which confused me because white church was only like an hour—in and out, thanks for coming. But at black church I would sit there for what felt like an eternity, trying to figure out why time moved so slowly. *Is it possible for time to actually stop? If so, why does it stop at black church and not at white church?* I eventually decided black people needed more time with Jesus because we suffered more. "I'm here to fill up on my blessings for the week," my mother used to say. The more time we spent at church, she reckoned, the more blessings we accrued, like a Starbucks Rewards Card.

Black church had one saving grace. If I could make it to the third or fourth hour I'd get to watch the pastor cast demons out of people. People possessed by demons would start running up and down the aisles like madmen, screaming in tongues. The ushers would tackle them, like bouncers at a club, and hold them down for the pastor. The pastor would grab their heads and violently shake them back and forth, shouting, "I cast out this spirit in the name of *Jesus!*" Some pastors were more violent than others, but what they all had

in common was that they wouldn't stop until the demon was gone and the congregant had gone limp and collapsed on the stage. The person had to fall. Because if he didn't fall that meant the demon was powerful and the pastor needed to come at him even harder. You could be a linebacker in the NFL. Didn't matter. That pastor was taking you *down*. Good Lord, that was fun.

Christian karaoke, badass action stories, and violent faith healers—man, I loved church. The thing I didn't love was the lengths we had to go to in order to get to church. It was an epic slog. We lived in Eden Park, a tiny suburb way outside Johannesburg. It took us an hour to get to white church, another forty-five minutes to get to mixed church, and another forty-five minutes to drive out to Soweto for black church. Then, if that wasn't bad enough, some Sundays we'd double back to white church for a special evening service. By the time we finally got home at night, I'd collapse into bed.

This particular Sunday, the Sunday I was hurled from a moving car, started out like any other Sunday. My mother woke me up, made me porridge for breakfast. I took my bath while she dressed my baby brother Andrew, who was nine months old. Then we went out to the driveway, but once we were finally all strapped in and ready to go, the car wouldn't start. My mom had this ancient, broken-down, brighttangerine Volkswagen Beetle that she picked up for next to nothing. The reason she got it for next to nothing was because it was always breaking down. To this day I hate secondhand cars. Almost everything that's ever gone wrong in my life I can trace back to a secondhand car. Secondhand cars made me get detention for being late for school. Secondhand cars left us hitchhiking on the side of the freeway. A secondhand car was also the reason my mom got married. If it hadn't been for the Volkswagen that didn't work, we never would have looked for the mechanic who became the husband who became the stepfather who became the man who tortured us for years and put a bullet in the back of my mother's head—I'll take the new car with the warranty every time.

As much as I loved church, the idea of a nine-hour slog, from mixed church to white church to black church then doubling back to white church again, was just too much to contemplate. It was bad enough in a car, but taking public transport would be twice as long and twice as hard. When the Volkswagen refused to start, inside my head I was praying, *Please say we'll just stay home. Please say we'll just stay home.* Then I glanced over to see the determined look on my mother's face, her jaw set, and I knew I had a long day ahead of me. "Come," she said. "We're going to catch minibuses."

—

My mother is as stubborn as she is religious. Once her mind's made up, that's it. Indeed, obstacles that would normally lead a person to change their plans, like a car breaking down, only made her more determined to forge ahead.

"It's the Devil," she said about the stalled car. "The Devil doesn't want us to go to church. That's why we've got to catch minibuses."

Whenever I found myself up against my mother's faith-based obstinacy, I would try, as respectfully as possible, to counter with an opposing point of view.

“Or,” I said, “the Lord knows that today we *shouldn’t* go to church, which is why he made sure the car wouldn’t start, so that we stay at home as a family and take a day of rest, because even the Lord rested.” “Ah, that’s the Devil talking, Trevor.”

“No, because Jesus is in control, and if Jesus is in control and we pray to Jesus, he would let the car start, but he hasn’t, therefore—”

“No, Trevor! Sometimes Jesus puts obstacles in your way to see if you overcome them. Like Job. This could be a test.”

“Ah! Yes, Mom. But the test could be to see if we’re willing to accept what has happened and stay at home and praise Jesus for his wisdom.”

“No. That’s the Devil talking. Now go change your clothes.”

“But, Mom!”

“Trevor! *Sun’qhela!*”

Sun’qhela is a phrase with many shades of meaning. It says “don’t undermine me,” “don’t underestimate me,” and “just try me.” It’s a command and a threat, all at once. It’s a common thing for Xhosa parents to say to their kids. Any time I heard it I knew it meant the conversation was over, and if I uttered another word I was in for a hiding—what we call a spanking.

At the time, I attended a private Catholic school called Maryvale College. I was the champion of the Maryvale sports day every single year, and my mother won the moms’ trophy every single year. Why? Because she was always chasing me to kick my ass, and I was always running not to get my ass kicked. Nobody ran like me and my mom. She wasn’t one of those “Come over here and get your hiding” type moms. She’d deliver it to you free of charge. She was a thrower, too. Whatever was next to her was coming at you. If it was something breakable, I had to catch it and put it down. If it broke, that would be my fault, too, and the ass-kicking would be that much worse. If she threw a vase at me, I’d have to catch it, put it down, and then run. In a split second, I’d have to think, *Is it valuable? Yes. Is it breakable? Yes. Catch it, put it down, now run.*

We had a very Tom and Jerry relationship, me and my mom. She was the strict disciplinarian; I was naughty as shit. She would send me out to buy groceries, and I wouldn’t come right home because I’d be using the change from the milk and bread to play arcade games at the supermarket. I loved videogames. I was a master at *Street Fighter*. I could go forever on a single play. I’d drop a coin in, time would fly, and the next thing I knew there’d be a woman behind me with a belt. It was a race. I’d take off out the door and through the dusty streets of Eden Park, clambering over walls, ducking through backyards. It was a normal thing in our neighborhood. Everybody knew: That Trevor child would come through like a bat out of hell, and his mom would be right there behind him. She could go at a full sprint in high heels, but if she really wanted to come after me she had this thing where she’d kick her shoes off while still going at top speed. She’d do this weird move with her ankles and the heels would go flying and she wouldn’t even miss a step. That’s when I knew, *Okay, she’s in turbo mode now.*

When I was little she always caught me, but as I got older I got faster, and when speed failed her she’d use her wits. If I was about to get away she’d yell, “*Stop! Thief!*” She’d do this to her own child. In South Africa, nobody gets involved in other people’s business—

unless it's mob justice, and then everybody wants in. So she'd yell "Thief!" knowing it would bring the whole neighborhood out against me, and then I'd have strangers trying to grab me and tackle me, and I'd have to duck and dive and dodge them as well, all the while screaming, "I'm not a thief! I'm her son!"

The last thing I wanted to do that Sunday morning was climb into some crowded minibus, but the second I heard my mom say *sun'qhela* I knew my fate was sealed. She gathered up Andrew and we climbed out of the Volkswagen and went out to try to catch a ride.

—

I was five years old, nearly six, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison. I remember seeing it on TV and everyone being happy. I didn't know why we were happy, just that we were. I was aware of the fact that there was a thing called apartheid and it was ending and that was a big deal, but I didn't understand the intricacies of it.

What I do remember, what I will never forget, is the violence that followed. The triumph of democracy over apartheid is sometimes called the Bloodless Revolution. It is called that because very little white blood was spilled. Black blood ran in the streets.

As the apartheid regime fell, we knew that the black man was now going to rule. The question was, which black man? Spates of violence broke out between the Inkatha Freedom Party and the ANC, the African National Congress, as they jockeyed for power. The political dynamic between these two groups was very complicated, but the simplest way to understand it is as a proxy war between Zulu and Xhosa. The Inkatha was predominantly Zulu, very militant and very nationalistic. The ANC was a broad coalition encompassing many different tribes, but its leaders at the time were primarily Xhosa. Instead of uniting for peace they turned on one another, committing acts of unbelievable savagery. Massive riots broke out. Thousands of people were killed. Necklacing was common. That's where people would hold someone down and put a rubber tire over his torso, pinning his arms. Then they'd douse him with petrol and set him on fire and burn him alive. The ANC did it to Inkatha. Inkatha did it to the ANC. I saw one of those charred bodies on the side of the road one day on my way to school. In the evenings my mom and I would turn on our little black-and-white TV and watch the news. A dozen people killed. Fifty people killed. A hundred people killed.

Eden Park sat not far from the sprawling townships of the East Rand, Thokoza and Katlehong, which were the sites of some of the most horrific Inkatha-ANC clashes. Once a month at least we'd drive home and the neighborhood would be on fire. Hundreds of rioters in the street. My mom would edge the car slowly through the crowds and around blockades made of flaming tires. Nothing burns like a tire—it rages with a fury you can't imagine. As we drove past the burning blockades, it felt like we were inside an oven. I used to say to my mom, "I think Satan burns tires in Hell."

Whenever the riots broke out, all our neighbors would wisely hole up behind closed doors. But not my mom. She'd head straight out, and as we'd inch our way past the blockades, she'd give the rioters this look. *Let me pass. I'm not involved in this shit.* She

was unwavering in the face of danger. That always amazed me. It didn't matter that there was a war on our doorstep. She had things to do, places to be. It was the same stubbornness that kept her going to church despite a broken-down car. There could be five hundred rioters with a blockade of burning tires on the main road out of Eden Park, and my mother would say, "Get dressed. I've got to go to work. You've got to go to school."

"But aren't you afraid?" I'd say. "There's only one of you and there's so many of them."

"Honey, I'm not alone," she'd say. "I've got all of Heaven's angels behind me."

"Well, it would be nice if we could see them," I'd say. "Because I don't think the rioters know they're there."

She'd tell me not to worry. She always came back to the phrase she lived by: "If God is with me, who can be against me?" She was never scared. Even when she should have been.

—

That carless Sunday we made our circuit of churches, ending up, as usual, at white church. When we walked out of Rosebank Union it was dark and we were alone. It had been an endless day of minibuses from mixed church to black church to white church, and I was exhausted. It was nine o'clock at least. In those days, with all the violence and riots going on, you did not want to be out that late at night. We were standing at the corner of Jellicoe Avenue and Oxford Road, right in the heart of Johannesburg's wealthy, white suburbia, and there were no minibuses. The streets were empty.

I so badly wanted to turn to my mom and say, "You see? This is why God wanted us to stay home." But one look at the expression on her face, and I knew better than to speak. There were times I could talk smack to my mom—this was not one of them.

We waited and waited for a minibus to come by. Under apartheid the government provided no public transportation for blacks, but white people still needed us to show up to mop their floors and clean their bathrooms. Necessity being the mother of invention, black people created their own transit system, an informal network of bus routes, controlled by private associations operating entirely outside the law. Because the minibus business was completely unregulated, it was basically organized crime. Different groups ran different routes, and they would fight over who controlled what. There was bribery and general shadiness that went on, a great deal of violence, and a lot of protection money paid to avoid violence. The one thing you didn't do was steal a route from a rival group. Drivers who stole routes would get killed. Being unregulated, minibuses were also very unreliable. When they came, they came. When they didn't, they didn't.

Standing outside Rosebank Union, I was literally falling asleep on my feet. Not a minibus in sight. Eventually my mother said, "Let's hitchhike." We walked and walked, and after what felt like an eternity, a car drove up and stopped. The driver offered us a ride, and we climbed in. We hadn't gone ten feet when suddenly a minibus swerved right in front of the car and cut us off.

A Zulu driver got out with an *iwisa*, a large, traditional Zulu weapon—a war club, basically. They're used to smash people's skulls in. Another guy, his crony, got out of the passenger side. They walked up to the driver's side of the car we were in, grabbed the man

who'd offered us a ride, pulled him out, and started shoving their clubs in his face. "Why are you stealing our customers? Why are you picking people up?"

It looked like they were going to kill this guy. I knew that happened sometimes. My mom spoke up. "Hey, listen, he was just helping me. Leave him. We'll ride with you. That's what we wanted in the first place." So we got out of the first car and climbed into the minibus.

We were the only passengers in the minibus. In addition to being violent gangsters, South African minibus drivers are notorious for complaining and haranguing passengers as they drive. This driver was a particularly angry one. As we rode along, he started lecturing my mother about being in a car with a man who was not her husband. My mother didn't suffer lectures from strange men. She told him to mind his own business, and when he heard her speaking in Xhosa, that really set him off. The stereotypes of Zulu and Xhosa women were as ingrained as those of the men. Zulu women were well-behaved and dutiful. Xhosa women were promiscuous and unfaithful. And here was my mother, his tribal enemy, a Xhosa woman alone with two small children—one of them a mixed child, no less. Not just a whore but a whore who sleeps with white men. "Oh, you're a *Xhosa*," he said. "That explains it. Climbing into strange men's cars. Disgusting woman."

My mom kept telling him off and he kept calling her names, yelling at her from the front seat, wagging his finger in the rearview mirror and growing more and more menacing until finally he said, "That's the problem with you Xhosa women. You're all sluts—and tonight you're going to learn your lesson."

He sped off. He was driving fast, and he wasn't stopping, only slowing down to check for traffic at the intersections before speeding through. Death was never far away from anybody back then. At that point my mother could be raped. We could be killed. These were all viable options. I didn't fully comprehend the danger we were in at the moment; I was so tired that I just wanted to sleep. Plus my mom stayed very calm. She didn't panic, so I didn't know to panic. She just kept trying to reason with him. "I'm sorry if we've upset you, *bhuti*. You can just let us out here—" "No."

"Really, it's fine. We can just walk—"

"No."

He raced along Oxford Road, the lanes empty, no other cars out. I was sitting closest to the minibus's sliding door. My mother sat next to me, holding baby Andrew. She looked out the window at the passing road and then leaned over to me and whispered, "Trevor, when he slows down at the next intersection, I'm going to open the door and we're going to jump."

I didn't hear a word of what she was saying, because by that point I'd completely nodded off. When we came to the next traffic light, the driver eased off the gas a bit to look around and check the road. My mother reached over, pulled the sliding door open, grabbed me, and threw me out as far as she could. Then she took Andrew, curled herself in a ball around him, and leaped out behind me.

It felt like a dream until the pain hit. *Bam!* I smacked hard on the pavement. My mother landed right beside me and we tumbled and tumbled and rolled and rolled. I was wide awake now. I went from half asleep to *What the hell?!* Eventually I came to a stop and

pulled myself up, completely disoriented. I looked around and saw my mother, already on her feet. She turned and looked at me and screamed.

“Run!”

So I ran, and she ran, and nobody ran like me and my mom.

It’s weird to explain, but I just knew what to do. It was animal instinct, learned in a world where violence was always lurking and waiting to erupt. In the townships, when the police came swooping in with their riot gear and armored cars and helicopters, I knew: *Run for cover. Run and hide.* I knew that as a five-year-old. Had I lived a different life, getting thrown out of a speeding minibus might have fazed me. I’d have stood there like an idiot, going, “What’s happening, Mom? Why are my legs so sore?” But there was none of that. Mom said “run,” and I ran. Like the gazelle runs from the lion, I ran.

The men stopped the minibus and got out and tried to chase us, but they didn’t stand a chance. We smoked them. I think they were in shock. I still remember glancing back and seeing them give up with a look of utter bewilderment on their faces. *What just happened? Who’d have thought a woman with two small children could run so fast?* They didn’t know they were dealing with the reigning champs of the Maryvale College sports day. We kept going and going until we made it to a twenty-four-hour petrol station and called the police. By then the men were long gone.

I still didn’t know why any of this had happened; I’d been running on pure adrenaline. Once we stopped running I realized how much pain I was in. I looked down, and the skin on my arms was scraped and torn. I was cut up and bleeding all over. Mom was, too. My baby brother was fine, though, incredibly. My mom had wrapped herself around him, and he’d come through without a scratch. I turned to her in shock.

“What was *that*?! Why are we running?!”

“What do you mean, ‘Why are we running?’ Those men were trying to kill us.”

“You never told me that! You just threw me out of the car!”

“I did tell you. Why didn’t you jump?”

“Jump?! I was asleep!”

“So I should have left you there for them to kill you?”

“At least they would have woken me up before they killed me.”

Back and forth we went. I was too confused and too angry about getting thrown out of the car to realize what had happened. My mother had saved my life.

As we caught our breath and waited for the police to come and drive us home, she said, “Well, at least we’re safe, thank God.” But I was nine years old and I knew better. I wasn’t going to keep quiet this time.

“No, Mom! This was *not* thanks to God! You should have listened to God when he told us to stay at home when the car wouldn’t start, because clearly the Devil tricked us into coming out tonight.”

“No, Trevor! That’s not how the Devil works. This is part of God’s plan, and if He wanted us here then He had a reason...”

And on and on and there we were, back at it, arguing about God's will. Finally I said, "Look, Mom. I know you love Jesus, but maybe next week you could ask him to meet us at our house. Because this really wasn't a fun night."

She broke out in a huge smile and started laughing. I started laughing, too, and we stood there, this little boy and his mom, our arms and legs covered in blood and dirt, laughing together through the pain in the light of a petrol station on the side of the road in the middle of the night.

Apartheid was perfect racism. It took centuries to develop, starting all the way back in 1652 when the Dutch East India Company landed at the Cape of Good Hope and established a trading colony, Kaapstad, later known as Cape Town, a rest stop for ships traveling between Europe and India. To impose white rule, the Dutch colonists went to war with the natives, ultimately developing a set of laws to subjugate and enslave them. When the British took over the Cape Colony, the descendants of the original Dutch settlers trekked inland and developed their own language, culture, and customs, eventually becoming their own people, the Afrikaners—the white tribe of Africa.

The British abolished slavery in name but kept it in practice. They did so because, in the mid-1800s, in what had been written off as a near-worthless way station on the route to the Far East, a few lucky capitalists stumbled upon the richest gold and diamond reserves in the world, and an endless supply of expendable bodies was needed to go in the ground and get it all out.

As the British Empire fell, the Afrikaner rose up to claim South Africa as his rightful inheritance. To maintain power in the face of the country's rising and restless black majority, the government realized they needed a newer and more robust set of tools. They set up a formal commission to go out and study institutionalized racism all over the world. They went to Australia. They went to the Netherlands. They went to America. They saw what worked, what didn't. Then they came back and published a report, and the government used that knowledge to build the most advanced system of racial oppression known to man.

Apartheid was a police state, a system of surveillance and laws designed to keep black people under total control. A full compendium of those laws would run more than three thousand pages and weigh approximately ten pounds, but the general thrust of it should be easy enough for any American to understand. In America you had the forced removal of the native onto reservations coupled with slavery followed by segregation. Imagine all three of those things happening to the same group of people at the same time. That was apartheid.

I grew up in South Africa during apartheid, which was awkward because I was raised in a mixed family, with me being the mixed one in the family. My mother, Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah, is black. My father, Robert, is white. Swiss/German, to be precise, which Swiss/Germans invariably are. During apartheid, one of the worst crimes you could commit was having sexual relations with a person of another race. Needless to say, my parents committed that crime.

In any society built on institutionalized racism, race-mixing doesn't merely challenge the system as unjust, it reveals the system as unsustainable and incoherent. Race-mixing proves that races can mix—and in a lot of cases, *want* to mix. Because a mixed person embodies that rebuke to the logic of the system, race-mixing becomes a crime worse than treason.

Humans being humans and sex being sex, that prohibition never stopped anyone. There were mixed kids in South Africa nine months after the first Dutch boats hit the beach in Table Bay. Just like in America, the colonists here had their way with the native women, as colonists so often do. Unlike in America, where anyone with one drop of black blood automatically became black, in South Africa mixed people came to be classified as their own separate group, neither black nor white but what we call “colored.” Colored people, black people, white people, and Indian people were forced to register their race with the government. Based on those classifications, millions of people were uprooted and relocated. Indian areas were segregated from colored areas, which were segregated from black areas—all of them segregated from white areas and separated from one another by buffer zones of empty land. Laws were passed prohibiting sex between Europeans and natives, laws that were later amended to prohibit sex between whites and all nonwhites.

The government went to insane lengths to try to enforce these new laws. The penalty for breaking them was five years in prison. There were whole police squads whose only job was to go around peeking through windows—clearly an assignment for only the finest law enforcement officers. And if an interracial couple got caught, God help them. The police would kick down the door, drag the people out, beat them, arrest them. At least that's what they did to the black person. With the white person it was more like, “Look, I'll just say you were drunk, but don't do it again, eh? Cheers.” That's how it was with a white man and a black woman. If a black man was caught having sex with a white woman, he'd be lucky if he wasn't charged with rape.

If you ask my mother whether she ever considered the ramifications of having a mixed child under apartheid, she will say no. She wanted to do something, figured out a way to do it, and then she did it. She had a level of fearlessness that you have to possess to take on something like she did. If you stop to consider the ramifications, you'll never do

anything. Still, it was a crazy, reckless thing to do. A million things had to go right for us to slip through the cracks the way we did for as long as we did.

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Under apartheid, if you were a black man you worked on a farm or in a factory or in a mine. If you were a black woman, you worked in a factory or as a maid. Those were pretty much your only options. My mother didn't want to work in a factory. She was a horrible cook and never would have stood for some white lady telling her what to do all day. So, true to her nature, she found an option that was not among the ones presented to her: She took a secretarial course, a typing class. At the time, a black woman learning how to type was like a blind person learning how to drive. It's an admirable effort, but you're unlikely to ever be called upon to execute the task. By law, white-collar jobs and skilled-labor jobs were reserved for whites. Black people didn't work in offices. My mom, however, was a rebel, and, fortunately for her, her rebellion came along at the right moment.

In the early 1980s, the South African government began making minor reforms in an attempt to quell international protest over the atrocities and human rights abuses of apartheid. Among those reforms was the token hiring of black workers in low-level white-collar jobs. Like typists. Through an employment agency she got a job as a secretary at ICI, a multinational pharmaceutical company in Braamfontein, a suburb of Johannesburg.

When my mom started working, she still lived with my grandmother in Soweto, the township where the government had relocated my family decades before. But my mother was unhappy at home, and when she was twenty-two she ran away to live in downtown Johannesburg. There was only one problem: It was illegal for black people to live there.

The ultimate goal of apartheid was to make South Africa a white country, with every black person stripped of his or her citizenship and relocated to live in the homelands, the Bantustans, semi-sovereign black territories that were in reality puppet states of the government in Pretoria. But this so-called white country could not function without black labor to produce its wealth, which meant black people had to be allowed to live near white areas in the townships, government-planned ghettos built to house black workers, like Soweto. The township was where you lived, but your status as a laborer was the only thing that permitted you to stay there. If your papers were revoked for any reason, you could be deported back to the homelands.

To leave the township for work in the city, or for any other reason, you had to carry a pass with your ID number; otherwise you could be arrested. There was also a curfew: After a certain hour, blacks had to be back home in the township or risk arrest. My mother didn't care. She was determined to never go home again. So she stayed in town, hiding and sleeping in public restrooms until she learned the rules of navigating the city from the other black women who had contrived to live there: prostitutes.

Many of the prostitutes in town were Xhosa. They spoke my mother's language and showed her how to survive. They taught her how to dress up in a pair of maid's overalls to move around the city without being questioned. They also introduced her to white men who were willing to rent out flats in town. A lot of these men were foreigners,

Germans and Portuguese who didn't care about the law and were happy to sign a lease giving a prostitute a place to live and work in exchange for a steady piece on the side. My mom wasn't interested in any such arrangement, but thanks to her job she did have money to pay rent. She met a German fellow through one of her prostitute friends, and he agreed to let her a flat in his name. She moved in and bought a bunch of maid's overalls to wear. She was caught and arrested many times, for not having her ID on the way home from work, for being in a white area after hours. The penalty for violating the pass laws was thirty days in jail or a fine of fifty rand, nearly half her monthly salary. She would scrape together the money, pay the fine, and go right back about her business.

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My mom's secret flat was in a neighborhood called Hillbrow. She lived in number 203. Down the corridor was a tall, brown-haired, browneyed Swiss/German expat named Robert. He lived in 206. As a former trading colony, South Africa has always had a large expatriate community. People find their way here. Tons of Germans. Lots of Dutch. Hillbrow at the time was the Greenwich Village of South Africa. It was a thriving scene, cosmopolitan and liberal. There were galleries and underground theaters where artists and performers dared to speak up and criticize the government in front of integrated crowds. There were restaurants and nightclubs, a lot of them foreign-owned, that served a mixed clientele, black people who hated the status quo and white people who simply thought it ridiculous. These people would have secret get-togethers, too, usually in someone's flat or in empty basements that had been converted into clubs. Integration by its nature was a political act, but the get-togethers themselves weren't political at all. People would meet up and hang out, have parties.

My mom threw herself into that scene. She was always out at some club, some party, dancing, meeting people. She was a regular at the Hillbrow Tower, one of the tallest buildings in Africa at that time. It had a nightclub with a rotating dance floor on the top floor. It was an exhilarating time but still dangerous. Sometimes the restaurants and clubs would get shut down, sometimes not. Sometimes the performers and patrons would get arrested, sometimes not. It was a roll of the dice. My mother never knew whom to trust, who might turn her in to the police. Neighbors would report on one another. The girlfriends of the white men in my mom's block of flats had every reason to report a black woman—a prostitute, no doubt—living among them. And you must remember that black people worked for the government as well. As far as her white neighbors knew, my mom could have been a spy posing as a prostitute posing as a maid, sent into Hillbrow to inform on whites who were breaking the law. That's how a police state works—everyone thinks everyone else is the police.

Living alone in the city, not being trusted and not being able to trust, my mother started spending more and more time in the company of someone with whom she felt safe: the tall Swiss man down the corridor in 206. He was forty-six. She was twenty-four. He was quiet and reserved; she was wild and free. She would stop by his flat to chat; they'd go to underground get-togethers, go dancing at the nightclub with the rotating dance floor. Something clicked.