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—NADINE GORDIMER

COUNTRY OF MY SKULL

GUILT, SORROW, AND THE LIMITS OF FORGIVENESS IN THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA

ANTJIE KROG

Introduction by CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT

For every victim who had an Afrikaner surname on her lips

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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 of 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:

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 of 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 those 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 of 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's 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 this 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 ordi-

nary 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. Salutes. "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. Verwoerd[1] 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 that 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

[1]Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, prime minister of South Africa from 1958 to 1966, chief architect of apartheid.

known the coldness and the bleakness *[die koud-heid en die kil-heid]* 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. Carl Niehaus, 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. Niehaus 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 a 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 . . . If 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, this 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 rand 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 ask 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 and 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 row 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. If 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 contacts, 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 "doughty 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 questions. 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, technically 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 Nel-

son 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, to 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 this 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. "I 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 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 their 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 any other 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 that 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, Moshoeshoe'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

[2]All names from the nineteenth century, when African tribes, Dutch settlers, and English colonists were competing for land in southern Africa. Moshoeshoe was the founder and first paramount chief of the Basothos; Dingane was a Zulu chief; Sekonyela was a Tlokwa chief, a rival of Moshoeshoe. Piet Retief was one of the Afrikaners who led the Great Trek into the interior to escape British rule; he was killed by Dingane in 1838.

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 in church," my mother said. Later, when I left for Johannesburg, I looked back to wave and I saw them 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 their 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: *abasocongi*—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:[1] *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

[1] Covert action during the 1980s by members of security forces and right-wing extremists who aimed to ensure the failure of negotiations by stirring up hatred and distrust among South Africans. They used a variety of violent methods, including violent attacks on innocent people, clandestine elimination of ANC operatives, and assassinations.

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. Botha[2] 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 this 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,

[2] Pieter Willem Botha, former head of the National Party; prime minister, then president, of South Africa from 1978 to 1989.

and experiences, it will have chosen to restore memory and foster a new humanity, and perhaps that is 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, Jayendra 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, I 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 to 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 this 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 against having too many theologians on the commission—"It could end up as the Church Commission."

Deal carefully with the concept of collective guilt, says Professor Jaap du Randt. People must realize: there but for the grace of God go I. One person's vigorous search for truth is another's witch-hunt.

Considering the enormous task ahead, it is clear that Adam Small's ambivalent rambling is not appreciated by the panel: "I am a man of two hearts and not of this world. This Truth Commission thing is useless—it wastes hard-earned money to listen to a bunch of crooks. Only literature can perform the miracle of reconciliation."

After three-quarters of an hour in this vein, Fink Haysom asks: "But you are so critical—do you *want* to serve on this commission?"

"If there is space on the commission for an independent, critical, stubborn, sometimes naughty voice, then I will be there with my heart—but I will always remain critical."

Most of the candidates say they were initially opposed to the commission, but that the long court case of Vlakplaas commander Eugene de Kock changed their minds. They realized that a commission could provide more answers to more people at a lower cost—and arrive at a fuller picture of what happened in the past as a bonus.

The last of the forty-six candidates is the Reverend Frank Chikane.

"The Truth Commission should bring a new morality to this country . . . People demanding punitive justice are ignoring the greater justice a new morality could bring—a shared morality, freed from colonialism, oppression, and greed . . ."

Simultaneously, the beepers hooked to our belts start to vibrate viciously. We press the buttons: "Pls phn edtr." Manelisi leaves the room to phone. When he gets back, he passes me a note: "Editor says we must leave for Pretoria immediately, otherwise we'll be late for the Mandela dinner."

But we're waiting for the litmus test. It has developed gradually over three weeks of interviewing. An aspiring commissioner is asked: What will you do if you discover information that concerns the highest positions in the new government? Most candidates answer that the stability of the Government of National Unity is important for the survival of everybody. South Africa's democracy is young and fragile. One would treat such sensitive information with care.

But we have to go. We switch off our machines. We try to pull our equipment unobtrusively across the table toward us. We see Chikane's eyes following the two microphones gliding in pas de deux to his left, toppling from the table into our laps. We pack up—we roll up meters of cable. Our beepers urge: "Get to Pta NOW."

Manelisi holds up his finger. Here it comes. The litmus test. And Chikane says: "I believe unequivocally that all information needs to be treated in the same manner. Whether it touches the highest trees or the most ordinary shrubs. Should we treat information about important politicians differently to that about ordinary people, we immediately create a new injustice as bad as the previous one."

We leave. Outside the hotel, it is Johannesburg, it is Friday, it is five o'clock, and it is raining.

In the car, we send through our reports. The car windows steam up. We drive. We work. The cell phone rings. It's Radio Tswana. With his feet on the accelerator and brakes, Manelisi does a "Question and Answer" about the prospective Truth Commissioners. I hold the wheel. We experience in symbiosis the dodging of cars. A close shave manifests only in Manelisi's intonation: "The candidate said that the commission should bring a . . . *[his voice suddenly revving]* nnneww! *[swerving]* morality." We clean the windows with our notes, with our socks.

I do a Q and A with Radio Lotus from Durban, then *PM Live* on SAFM. We open some windows—we get soaked; we drive; we work.

The cell phone rings: "I'm hearing you on the radio . . . where the fuck are you? All of us are waiting outside the presidential gates."

The boss. I give the phone to Manelisi. I do the gears; he does the explanation. "We don't know . . . it's raining, we can't see anything, but we must be close to Pretoria."

We calculate. It's ten to six. He has to iron his shirt. We are not going to make it.

Radio Xhosa phones; Radio Lesedi waits on the line. We pass an accident—sirens and red light splashed on wet tar. While the cars slowly crawl ahead, I move across the gearshift, Manelisi slips underneath, and I am behind the wheel, foot on the gas. Sweat and rain covering us . . . here's the Voortrekker Monument . . . Unisa . . .

Six o'clock the cell phone rings.

"We're in Kerkstraat."

"Okay, we are on the steps here. Parks is waiting for us. We'll go in . . . don't dress up, just come, so that we can all be seated by ten past."

Against all odds, we find ourselves in front of the gates of President Mandela's official residence—"the house with the name that whites cannot remember." The guards stop us. We open the window and explain in four different languages who we are. They let us through. We speed up to the house in lanes of water and stop neatly in the last parking spot. We jump out. We open the trunk and grab our clothes. I open the back door and, in the pouring rain, unfasten my belt. Manelisi's T-shirt is halfway over his head when:

"Wait . . . *wait!* You cannot. You cannot undress here—the whole house overlooks the parking lot." It's the guard. "Just go deeper into the garden," he begs.

We take our clothes and stumble into the wet, muddy, dark garden, while our beepers go berserk. The ground is wet; everywhere there are pools of water and mud. I clasp my clothes together while I take off my jeans. I put them on the wet ground. I put my clothes on top. Manelisi does the same. I pull on stockings and shoes, and just when I'm busy washing under my arms with water dripping from the leaves, we hear voices. A flashlight falls on Manelisi in his red underpants, leaning slightly forward, shaking out his shirt. Absolute silence follows. The frozen moment is loudly broken by Manelisi. As if he is the president himself, he lifts his hands in annoyance: "Hey, guys, please. People are dressing here. Respect our privacy."

Upon which the guards obediently switch off the flashlight, make an about-face, and march away. Nine minutes past six. We run up the steps and slip into line just in time to greet the president. Our boss glows. "It's wonderful that you are here." She hands me a tissue to wipe my lenses and asks the doorman if Manelisi can nip out quickly to scrape some mud from his shoes.

In November, a list of twenty-five names is submitted to the president. Behind the scenes, it's said that, with one or two exceptions, the cream of the people with a human rights profile have already been taken up into the ranks of the ANC government and its various commissions.

Many of the names are unknown to the majority of South Africans. Some of them will remain unknown until the end of the process.

But before the final list can be compiled, the panel and the president have to clarify several things. Should a victim of gross human rights violations serve on the commission? What about someone like Father Michael Lapsley? How impartial can a person be who has lost both hands in a bomb attack? Would black victims identify with a white victim? Moreover, should people on the list be representative of a type of morality, or do they need to represent gender, politics, race, province, language, and so forth? To put it another way: Which Afrikaners will be on the commission? Those who paid a price in the past for their stance against apartheid or those who can now draw in the support of the National Party and right-wingers? And how can a former right-wing Afrikaner take moral decisions about people whose sentiments he shared?

Which black people will serve on the commission? How does one differentiate between people who got involved in the struggle because they were against the inhuman system of apartheid and those who got involved because they wanted the same material comforts as whites? How many black people will have the courage to take a critical public stance toward the new government? Should the Muslim as well as the Hindu religion be represented, and what about the Cape Muslims?

It's difficult to gauge exactly what the panel was thinking when they drew up the short list. Two additions, though, show how the wind is blowing. The Reverend Khoza Mgojo was added to give better representation to KwaZulu-Natal. Advocate Denzil Potgieter was added because of apparent unhappiness over the absence of colored people on the list. What about Glenda Wildschut, she's colored isn't she? . . . Yes, yes, but everybody knows "people" means "men."

The rest of the list one could more or less have predicted. The Afrikaners are Wynand Malan and Advocate Chris de Jager. The English commissioners are Alex Boraine, Mary Burton, Wendy Orr, and Richard Lyster; and the Indians, Dr. Faizel Randera and Yasmin Sooka. The black commissioners can be divided into two groups: those who will eventually be referred to as the Nguni Bloc or Black Caucus—Dumisa Ntsebeza and Bongani Finca—and the women, Mapule Ramashala, Hlengiwe Mkhize, and Sisi Khampepe.

This then is Tutu's team. And they have nothing to start off with. Not a chair, not a telephone, not a budget. Just a law.

The speed with which the commission gets on its feet is watched with envious eyes. A government spokesperson confides: "The Truth Commission is the ideal for all of us. Within a few months, it set up four offices, its internal communication is astonishingly up-and-running, the publicity it generates is better than textbook-perfect, it doesn't let itself be paralyzed—neither by bureaucratic red tape, nor by the government or any political party. Everyone knows that they are navigating a tight financial ship. They work on a contract basis. They evaluate their own activities and their personnel. The commission is an example of how things *can* be done."

On the insistence of Archbishop Tutu, the commissioners gather at the end of January 1996 for a retreat under the guidance of Father Francis Cull, Tutu's spiritual adviser.

"What lies ahead is a very difficult task. They have been called to do something for the whole of South Africa and, of course, one feels inadequate to deal with an immense job like this," says Cull. He explains how commissioners will not be allowed to talk during the retreat, even during mealtimes. "In the military sense, a retreat is a time when you withdraw in order to regroup and recoup. So, in a religious, spiritual sense, it is a time when you go into a place of solitude and silence, where you can be still and where you can come to terms with your inner journey. Where you can concentrate and focus on your own resources and the task ahead."

Through the luxury suburb of Bishop's Court, I follow the directions to the house of the archbishop, for the Truth Commission's first photo session. Even though a radio journalist cannot do much with a photograph, the chance to look around the official residence of an archbishop

is too good to pass up. Guards block the way; there are dogs and demands for ID books, because the first death threats have already been made against some commissioners.

But as you take the garden path, seamed with shoulder-high hortensias, up to the big house, you get a feeling of transition—of transformation—of the have-nots occupying the world of the haves. It's a densely overgrown property, rich with trees and plants. But you can tell immediately: whatever is growing was planted long ago. No fine garden, no expanse of lawn—cut a little here, trim a little there, and that's it. You arrive in a courtyard that leads to the main house, the offices, and other buildings. Three children splash around in a half-empty fountain. Several families are obviously living in the outbuildings on the extensive property.

We journalists are taken to the dining room. A gigantic, elaborate table with carved chairs. On the wall hangs a skewish tapestry, woven with love for the archbishop by the women of Boitumelo. The study has heavy timber bookcases from floor to ceiling, partly filled with row upon row of leather-bound volumes. On other shelves lie stacks of alternative magazines, church pamphlets, and theological works out of Africa that could only have been printed on local presses. A series of gold-framed portraits of previous pink-and-chubby archbishops hangs next to homemade presents and badly taken photographs, testimony to the first black archbishop's lifetime of service to people once neglected and now eternally grateful. A handmade cross rests against the wall—Jesus looking more like an amnesty-seeker than a victim.

While we wait, a colleague tells us this story. "When Tutu comes to preach in Namaqualand," he says, "it's so hot, it's always hot on a Sunday. And when the service is finished, Tutu comes to my grandmother's house to lie there under the tree—she has such a dense, shady tree. And then for the next week the people talk of nothing else but that holy man . . . the Lord's chosen one . . . who lies under a tree—just like an ordinary person."

The door opens and the seventeen commissioners walk in. The media suddenly go wild, popping and flashing. Photographers elbow each other out of the way; the TV crew begs people not to crowd the camera angle. Somebody trips over my recording equipment with a tooth-shattering *klap*. While the commissioners are still busy seating themselves, a journalist calls out: "When is your first hearing?"

But something is happening. Absolutely focused, they seat them-

selves and Tutu bows his head and starts to pray: ". . . that we may have the strength to listen to the whispers of the abandoned, the pleas of those afraid, the anguish of those without hope." Whereas at their first gathering the commissioners looked either shy or too pleased with themselves, now there is a purposefulness in their bearing that suddenly has nothing to do with religion or group representation.

"This is just a photo session," Tutu says, "because the newspapers asked for a head-and-shoulders shot of each commissioner. After that, you may leave."

With just two weeks to go to the first hearings, challenges are launched against the Truth Commission legislation on constitutional grounds. Earlier, police general Johan van der Merwe has said that refusing amnesty would be unconstitutional. The interim Constitution clearly states that there *will* be amnesty. Hot on his heels are the families of Steve Biko, and Griffiths and Victoria Mxenge. They say that amnesty will take away the right of the ordinary citizen to a civil claim. During the first months of its life, the commission is constantly in court trying to clear up aspects of the legislation.

At a press conference, Deputy Chairperson Alex Boraine says: The commission has encountered opposition from day one—chiefly from the right wing. The head of the investigative unit, Dumisa Ntsebeza, says: Steve Biko's death[3] happened almost twenty years ago, it was not the commission that stopped the families from going to court. Moreover, Biko's family accepted an out-of-court settlement in which they received 65,000 rand [about $11,000]. According to Tutu, all the narratives around the commission are important; he insists that families have the right to strive for justice. But the commission has a far greater task, he says, which is "to listen to the unknown victims—those who have never received any attention from the authorities or the media—and to provide a forum for the exposure of their experiences."

Suddenly people seem to find the idea of amnesty repugnant. And Tutu is the one who has to explain: "*We* did not decide on amnesty. The political parties decided on amnesty. Amnesty made our election possible. The amnesty clause was inserted in the early hours of the morning

[3]Political activist Steve Biko, leader of the black consciousness movement that arose in the 1970s, died in 1977 of massive head injuries after twenty-six days in police detention.

after an exhausted night of negotiating. The last thing, the last sentence, the last clause, was added: amnesty shall be granted through a process of reconciliation. And it was only when *that* was put in, that the *boere* signed the negotiations, opening the door to our election." Tutu repeats this story in all the languages he can muster.

According to Johnny de Lange, the legislation was carefully checked by constitutional experts, and he has no doubt that it falls within the framework of the Constitution.

Meanwhile, the Mxenge family announce that they will sue security police assassin Dirk Coetzee for 1 million rand (about $167,000). Says Coetzee: "I am back in the country for six years already. It is strange that for all these years they have not charged me, but now that I am asking for amnesty, they have a problem. And this after I was prepared to testify for them in 1992 in a civil case against the old government."

"Do you have a million rand?" I ask.

"No, I do not even have a million cent, I have nothing . . . I have lost everything. I live in a rented house, with furniture that I got from my parents; I drive my mother-in-law's car."

A commission for truth? Long before the idea took shape in Parliament, it was discussed at two conferences, both organized by Dr. Alex Boraine. The first one took place early in 1994. Highly skeptical, I found a place at the back of the hall. The only images of righteousness I had to go by were of German geriatrics with cancer in overseas docks. What would be the effect of a manacled P. W. Botha, stripped of his little hat and forefinger, on his way to long-term imprisonment, other than astonishment that anyone could regard this as the final proof of justice?

But immediately I'm ashamed. Of course crimes against humanity should be punished.

It takes the Chilean philosopher and activist José Zalaquett, who served on the Chilean Truth Commission, precisely seven and a half minutes to convert me to the idea. The Nuremberg and Tokyo trials could work the way they did only because the guilty lost their political power and their guns. Their defeat was complete and the conquerors needed only to wrestle with their own sense of justice. But in Chile, as in South Africa, the overthrown regime is part of the new government and still has enough power to obstruct the inquests into any abuses or to start a new civil war.

Ideological purists, says Zalaquett—and every sentence he utters

could serve as a maxim—maintain that it's better to suffer longer under a tyranny when there is hope for a politically purer outcome than to progress by messy compromises.

One cannot expect morality from politicians, but one can hold them to the ethics of accountability.

A policy that wants to make a difference has to prevent a repetition of past abuses and compensate for what has happened where possible.

It will sometimes be necessary to choose between truth and justice. We should choose truth, he says. Truth does not bring back the dead, but releases them from silence.

A community should not wipe out a part of its past, because it leaves a vacuum that will be filled by lies and contradictory, confusing accounts of what happened.

Perpetrators need to acknowledge the wrong they did. Why? It creates a communal starting point. To make a clean break from the past, a moral beacon needs to be established between the past and the future.

"The most important lesson the struggle taught me and my friends is that no one is endowed with remarkable courage. But courage is another name for learning to live with your fears. Now, after eighteen years and the Chilean Truth Commission, courage has again evolved a new definition; the guts not to give in to easy justice. To live within the confinements of reality, but to search day after day for the progressing of one's most cherished values. Merciless. Accountable."

Identity is memory, says Zalaquett. Identities forged out of half-remembered things or false memories easily commit transgressions.

Everybody seems excited about the presence of the Polish philosopher Adam Mischnik. He quotes Jürgen Habermas: Collective guilt does not exist. Whoever is guilty will have to answer individually. At the same time, there is such a thing as collective responsibility for a mental and cultural context that makes possible crimes against humanity. One should be aware of the fact that traditions are ambivalent and that one should stay critical about traditions and be very clear about what should be continued. The violations in Germany should have the effect that a specific mistrust exists about German tradition and cultural contexts. Like Germany, South Africa will always need to question its mentality, while communities with a stronger democratic culture need not do it so often.

"Here in South Africa it's reconciliation with a gun against your head. You choose negotiations when you choose the logic of peace. But

the moment you get up from the negotiation table, you have to defend your erstwhile enemy—he is now your partner. He becomes your political and moral burden." Mischnik warns: "If you look for a scapegoat, and you find one and you make him the devil . . . then you yourself become the angel . . ."

". . . and then you wake up . . . lost," the interpreter says tentatively.

Mischnik nods his head vigorously.

Kader Asmal quotes Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: "By not dealing with past human rights violations, we are not simply protecting the perpetrators' trivial old age; we are thereby ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations."

FIRST HEARINGS

CHAPTER THREE

Stretched Thinner and Thinner over Pitches of Grief

Tension is plain to see in the faces and body language of all the commissioners. Archbishop Tutu is continually rubbing his right hand; shoulders are tensely set; faces look tired and drawn beneath two big South African flags and Truth Commission banners. The city hall of East London is packed from wall to wall.

Last night, the archbishop says, he had butterflies in his stomach: "We were aware from the beginning that the commission could go terribly and horribly wrong. But this first victims' hearing is the making or breaking of the commission."

"So what are your worst fears?"

He laughs nervously. "Silly things, like the microphones not working, security problems . . . or terrible things like victims not showing up or violence breaking out."

Commissioner Bongani Finca starts with the well-known Xhosa hymn: *"Lizalise idinga lakho"* (The forgiveness of sins makes a person whole). As the song carries, the victims file into the hall and take their seats at the front.

Archbishop Tutu prays. But untypically he sounds as if he is praying from a piece of paper: "We long to put behind us the pain and division of apartheid, together with all the violence which ravaged our communities in its name. And so we ask you to bless this Truth and Reconciliation Commission with your wisdom and guidance as a body which seeks to redress the wounds in the minds and the bodies of those who suffered."

Everyone stands with heads bowed while the names of the deceased and disappeared who will come under the spotlight today are read out.

A big white candle emblazoned with a red cross is lit. Then all the commissioners go over to the victims to greet and welcome them, while the audience stays standing.

But the journalists in the media room are hardly aware of this consecration of space. Frantic shouting accompanies the attempts to tune in TV monitors, establish clear sound reception, and set up laptop computers. Radio has its own small room. We have a whole newly appointed team, which has to cover the event in all eleven official languages. Today's hearings will be broadcast live, after an hour-long program on the meaning of the legislation, the origin of amnesty, the workings of the commission, and an interview with the minister of justice. Somewhere in a corner, foreign journalists are being briefed on the history of the eastern Cape, how to pronounce "Qaqawuli" and "Mxenge." Like people possessed, they take down notes. The locals watch them from a distance.

To seize the surge of language by its soft, bare skull

Beloved, do not die. Do not dare die! I, the survivor, I wrap you in words so that the future inherits you. I snatch you from the death of forgetfulness. I tell your story, complete your ending—you who once whispered beside me in the dark.

"When I opened the door . . . there was my closest friend and comrade . . . She was standing on the doorstep and she screamed: 'My child, my little Nomzamo, is still in the house!' . . . I stared at her . . . my most beautiful friend . . . her hair flaming and her chest like a furnace . . . she died a day later. I pulled out her baby from the burning house . . . I put her on the grass . . . only to find that her skin stayed behind on my hands. She is with me here today."

"I was trying to see my child. Just when he was about to open the police van at the back, I heard a voice shouting, saying: 'No, don't show her anything—*hou die meid daar weg!*' ['Keep the *kaffer* girl away from there!'] But I managed. I pulled a green curtain . . . I saw . . . my . . . child . . . sleeping among tires . . . and he was foaming in the mouth and he was . . . already dead . . . Then they pulled him out and threw him on the ground . . . And I looked at him . . . And he was dying . . . and they won't allow me to hold him . . ."

"This inside me . . . fights my tongue. It is . . . unshareable. It destroys . . . words. Before he was blown up, they cut off his hands so he could not be fingerprinted . . . So how do I say this?—this terrible . . . I want his hands back."

"It was Sunday. And cold. He came into the kitchen. 'Make me some bean soup.'

" 'It's Sunday, *jong*, I want to cook special food.'

"But he wanted bean soup.

"While dressing for church, we heard the noise. The youths were coming down the road. We were standing in our bedroom. We were not talking. We were not moving. They surrounded the house and they shouted: 'Let the spy *die*, let the spy *die!*' They threw stones through the window. When they left, he said to me: 'Don't cry, Nontuthuzelo. A person dies only once, not many times. I know now where these things are leading to. Come, let's make soup.' We went to the kitchen and put the beans in a pot.

"Then someone we knew knocked at the door. 'The comrades are burning your shop, Uncle Mick!'

" 'I'll be back for lunch,' he said to me.

"They told me afterward. He walked up to the door of his shop, he didn't look back . . . someone in the crowd shot him in the back . . . They told me afterward Craig Kotze had said my husband was the one who betrayed Steve Biko."

"Two policemen got on either chair and they dragged me to the window, and then they said I can now jump . . . I refused . . . they grabbed me by my shoulders and lifted me physically up and pushed me out of the window . . . and they were holding me by my ankles . . . each policeman holding one ankle. All I could see was the concrete floor at the bottom—we were three floors up, and all of a sudden one would let go of one foot—as he's about to catch my foot, the one he had released, the other chap lets go—and they played like that . . . and, you know, you thought: God, this is the end."

"They held me . . . they said, 'Please don't go in there . . .' I just skipped through their legs and went in . . . I found Bheki . . . he was in pieces . . . he was hanging on pieces . . . He was all over . . . pieces of him and brain was scattered all around . . . that was the end of Bheki."

"At Caledon Square, I heard a loud sound. Policemen were celebrating. They said: 'We've got Looksmart!' I was in my cell when I saw Looksmart being dragged up a flight of stairs by two policemen. They were beating him as he went up the stairs. I noticed that his beard had been pulled out . . . one by one . . . on one side of his face. He was bleeding heavily from the mouth. Two days later, they took him again—his hands handcuffed behind his back. That was the last time I saw Looksmart Ngudle."

"And the man there sitting next to the ambulance driver—he stood there with my son's intestines in his hands and he was actually holding it and carried it into the ambulance."

"In the mortuary—after the Queenstown massacre—I had to identify my son. We waited in front of the mortuary . . . a thick black stream of blood was running from under the door . . . blocking the outside drain . . . inside, the stench was unbearable . . . bodies were stacked upon each other . . . the blood from my child's body was already green."

"This white man with the red scarf, he shot into the outside bathroom where Sonnyboy was hiding . . . I was standing in the kitchen . . . I saw him dragging my child. Sonnyboy was already dead. He was holding him by his legs like a dog. I saw him digging a hole, scraping Sonnyboy's brains into that hole, and closing it with his boot. The sun was bright . . . but it went dark when I saw him lying there. It's an everlasting pain. It will stop never in my heart. It always comes back. It eats me apart. Sonnyboy, rest well, my child. I've translated you from the dead."

"I asked them, 'Show me the mark on his chin, then I will know it's my son.' They showed me the mark on his chin, and I said: 'It's not my son.' "

"When Fuzile didn't come home that night, I went to look for him. Now this makes me mad, really. My son was shot and nobody told me. I looked everywhere and nobody told me my son was in the mortuary . . . they later gave me his clothes. His T-shirt looked as if it had been eaten by rats."

"As she had a baby, the police said that the corpse could breast-feed the baby."

"Barnard was a frightful man—the cop we couldn't kill. He always drove this red Valiant and wore this red *doek*. Rambo of the western Cape, he called himself. Whenever his car appeared on the shimmering horizon leading the yellow Casspirs, we knew: someone dies today. We will remember the man with the red scarf who shot dead our sons."

"This was the last thing I saw: Barnard standing next to his car. He spoke Xhosa like a Xhosa. He pointed his firearm at me. I felt something hitting my cheek. I felt my eyes itching. I was scratching my eyes and yelling for help. Since then I've been blind . . . and unemployed . . . and alone and homeless. But today . . . it feels as if I can nearly see . . ."

"I heard shots . . . I ran . . . slipped and fell . . . I crawled out at the front door . . . On the steps, my son sat . . . with his father's face in his hands . . . He was covered in blood . . . He cried over and over: 'Daddy, talk to me . . .' Today he is twenty-one years old. I am still woken at night by his cries: 'Wipe the blood . . . wipe the blood from my father's face.' "

"That morning I did something I had never done before. My husband was still at his desk busy with the accounts of our business. I went up to him and stood behind his chair. I put my hands under his arms and tickled him . . . he looked surprised and unexpectedly happy.

" 'And now?' he asked.

" 'I am going to make tea,' I said.

"While I poured water on the tea bags, I heard this devastating noise. Six men stormed into our study and blew his head off. My five-year-old daughter was present . . . That Christmas I found a letter on his desk: 'Dear Father Christmas, please bring me a soft teddy bear with friendly eyes . . . My daddy is dead. If he was here, I would not have bothered you.' I put her in a boarding school. The morning we drove there, we had a flat tire. 'You see,' she said, 'Daddy does not want me to go there . . . He wants me to stay with you . . . I have watched him die, I must be there when you die . . .' She is now a teenager and has tried twice to commit suicide."

In the beginning, it was seeing. Seeing for ages, filling the head with ash. No air. No tendril. Now to seeing, speaking is added and the eye plunges into the mouth. Present at the birth of this country's language itself.

And it wipes us out. Like a fire. Or a flood. Tears are not what we call it. Water covers our cheeks and we cannot type. Or think.

> "We should all be deeply humbled by what we've heard,
> but we've got to finish quickly and really turn our backs
> on this awful past and say: 'Life is for living.' "
>
> —ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU,
> *after the first day of testimony in East London*

MS. GOBODO-MADIKIZELA: Baba is going to present to us what he says is the work of the man who came to be known as the Rambo of the Peninsula. The police officer who is known by the name of Barnard. Good morning, I am just going to explain to you how this house is arranged. If you face toward your right, that is now the whole house, people in this house are approximately two hundred to two hundred and fifty. You are now seated on the platform. And our small tables are arranged as a horseshoe. Right in the middle of the horseshoe is Archbishop Tutu, next to him is Dr. Boraine, I am right at the extreme end of this horseshoe. I am seated directly across from you, we are facing each other. We are now going to start to talk to each other, Baba.

Could you please tell us, Baba, what happened on that day of this incident, could you please explain to us.

MR. SIKWEPERE: . . . A van approached—it was a white van and it was driven by Barnard. When he had just passed, he asked us all to disperse within five minutes. Now the communities asked, "How can he ask us to disperse, because this is just a small meeting?"—we were just twenty to twenty-five.

I wanted to find out what was the response from this white man. When I saw that the van now was stationary, I went to it. I was just standing for two minutes next to the window . . . now this white man opened the door and withdrew his gun. Now I wanted to find out what is the story going on, on the other side of this car. I tried to peep and I was looking straight into him, straight to him. While

I was still looking at him, these people asked him, "How can you ask us to disperse?"

This white man said this in Afrikaans—"You are going to get eventually what you are looking for. And I am going to shoot you." I was shocked at what this white man said to me. He said in Afrikaans, *"Ek gaan jou kry."* Now I wanted to find out why is he talking to me like this . . . I saw people surrounding this van—I was now wondering, Where do these people come from surrounding this van, all of a sudden?

After that I heard a loud noise, it sounded like a stone hitting a sink. But I decided not to run, I decided to walk. Because I knew that if you ran, you were going to be shot, so I decided—let me just walk into a safe place where I can just start running . . . When I arrived at the place where I thought now I am safe, I felt something hitting my cheek. I couldn't go any further, I stayed right there only to find out I had been hidden by a corner of a house. I felt my eyes itching, I was scratching my eyes. I wasn't quite sure what happened to my eyes at that particular time. I felt somebody stepping on my right shoulder. And saying, "I thought this dog had died already." I felt both my eyes—I was just waiting that these people are going to take me to a prison.

MS. GOBODO-MADIKIZELA: Baba, do you have any bullets in you as we speak?

MR. SIKWEPERE: Yes, there are several of them. Some are here in my neck. Now on my face you can really see them, but my face feels quite rough, it feels like rough salt. I usually have terrible headaches.

MS. GOBODO-MADIKIZELA: Thank you, Baba.

MR. SIKWEPERE: Yes, usually I have a fat body, but after that I lost all my body, now I am thin, as you can see me now.

MS. GOBODO-MADIKIZELA: How do you feel, Baba, about coming here to tell us your story?

MR. SIKWEPERE: I feel what—what has brought my sight back, my eyesight back is to come back here and tell the story. But I feel what has been making me sick all the time is the fact that I couldn't tell my story. But now I—it feels like I got my sight back by coming here and telling you the story.

(Lucas Baba Sikwepere)

Instinctively, one knew that some people would deliberately cut themselves off from the Truth Commission process. But very few people escape news bulletins—even the music stations have a lunchtime news report. So it is crucial to us that the commission and its narratives be captured as fully as possible on ordinary bulletins. Even people who do no more than listen to the news should be given a full understanding of the essence of the commission. This means that the past has to be put into hard news gripping enough to make bulletin headlines, into reports that the bulletin writers in Johannesburg cannot ignore. To do this, we will have to use the full spectrum of hard news techniques and where necessary develop and reform them.

A bulletin generally consists of three audio elements: ordinary reporting read out by a newsreader, twenty-second sound bites of other people's voices, and forty-second voice reports sent through by a journalist. How can these elements be molded to our aims? An expert needs to come help me, I plead. And they send Angie.

I sit next to her in the media room. It is the first day of the hearings. Angie types codes and passwords into her laptop computer to log on to the network. We wait: little lights flash and scratchy shrieks issue from the modem—sounds of broken glass. For the rest of my life, I will remember this scene: the members of the radio team, each wearing earphones, recording the translation of their assigned language, and Angie on a cushion, so that she can reach the high table, making a furious assault on the day's first news story—furious, because Angie is someone who types with all ten of her fingers. And as those pinkies squirrel away on the keys, the testimony of the first victim of the first day, Nohle Mohape, goes through to Johannesburg—in time for the eleven o'clock bulletin.

Thus our labors over the next two years will be structured. We do short packages, text with sound bites or live interviews, for the afternoon programs, and in the evenings we work on longer pieces for the following morning. Meanwhile the bulletins keep flowing through. Stories, complete stories with beginnings, middles, and ends, are told for the first time: in a forty-second report, we relate how Phindile Mfeti told his wife that he was going to have his jeans shortened, then disappeared without a trace. How she later found on his desk the glasses and pipe that he always took with him. How she asked the commission for something to bury—even if it was just a piece of bone or a handful of ash.

We also learn quickly. For words like "menstruation" or "penis," there is no place on the news; a phrase such as "They braaied [barbecued] my child on a fire" is out of the question. We are told that the writer Rian Malan has complained that he doesn't want to mix "breakfast and blood" in the mornings. This is just the encouragement we need. We write the first lines of the hard copy: "The missing hand of ANC activist Sicelo Mhlawuli dominated the testimonies before the Truth Commission hearings in East London today. Mhlawuli's hand was last seen by a fellow detainee." Then the recorded comment: "I saw the severed hand of a black activist in a bottle at a Port Elizabeth police station. The police told me it was a baboon's hand. They said to me: 'Look here, this is the bottled hand of a communist.' But I know that Sicelo Mhlawuli . . . was buried with his hand missing." This is a perfect sound bite. (How quickly our own language changes—"fantastic testimony," "sexy subject," "nice audible crying." We also insist on the use of "Truth Commission" rather than "TRC," which would conceal the essence of the commission behind a meaningless abbreviation.)

We pick out a sequence. We remove some pauses and edit it into a twenty-second sound bite. We feed it to Johannesburg. We switch on a small transistor. The news comes through: "I was making tea in the police station. I heard a noise, I looked up . . . There he fell . . . Someone fell from the upper floor past the window . . . I ran down . . . It was my child . . . my grandchild, but I raised him."

We lift our fists triumphantly. We've done it!

The voice of an ordinary cleaning woman is the headline on the one o'clock news.

Week after week, voice after voice, account after account. It is not so much the deaths, and the names of the dead, but the web of infinite sorrow woven around them. It keeps on coming and coming. A wide, barren, disconsolate landscape where the horizon keeps on dropping away.

And this is how we often end up at the daily press conferences—bewildered and close to tears at the feet of Archbishop Tutu. By the end of four weeks, they are no longer press conferences. He caresses us with pieces of hope and humanity. We ask fewer and fewer critical questions. Perplexed, we listen to the sharp, haughty questions posed by foreign journalists—those who jet into the country, attend one day's hearings,

and then confront the commission about its lack of judicial procedures and objectivity.

The first sign of the International Journalist in your midst is the subtle fragrance. Male or female, overseas journalists can obviously afford a perfumery that you won't find on the shelves at Pick 'n Pay. The second sign is the equipment. Microphones like cruise missiles on launching pads appear in front of interviewees, and you have to find space next to them for your humble little SABC mike. They are equipped with recorders that produce fully edited sound bites and reports at the push of a button, computers they can carry in their inside pockets, and cell phones no bigger than lipsticks. And they know something really big is happening in East London, they pick up the vibes—but nothing fits into their operating frameworks. "How can you report *anything?*" A Belgian journalist struggles to keep the skepticism out of his voice. "South African journalists keep on bursting into tears all around me in the hall."

The Story of the Century, they tell us. With heroes and villians, well-known and unknown characters, the powerful and the powerless, the literate and the illiterate. Hung with laptops, tape recorders, bags, notebooks, and reels of cable and tape, we limp into hotel foyers long after midnight.

Why the eastern Cape—why start at this scalp of green silence?

This part of Africa was the first frontier between black and white, between the terrestrial endeavor of Africa and the maritime endeavor of Europe, says Noel Mostert in his book *Frontiers*. The eastern Cape opened between white and black a relationship beyond that of master and slave. Its landscape provided a dramatic backdrop for the moral struggles around colonialism, expansionism, race, and freedom.

According to Mostert, the indigenous people of the eastern Cape found themselves selected by history to bear for centuries the brunt of contact with the outside world. Despite the fact that these were peaceful farming and cattle-herding communities, the area became known for its fierce resistance to oppression. The Xhosas originally consisted of three main groups: the Pondo, to which Winnie Madikizela-Mandela belongs; the Thembu house, of which her former husband is a prince; and the Xhosa group, which produced Steve Biko.

Resistance in the eastern Cape was complemented by excellent missionary schooling, which enabled the oppressed to put forward a refined political argument in English, thus breaking new ground in black political thinking internationally. The eastern Cape also saw the beginnings of the Pan-Africanist Congress and Black Consciousness. From the sixties onward, with the cream of its leadership either in jail or in exile, the eastern Cape endured an unprecedented escalation of human rights abuses, many of them notorious. These included the detention and death of Steve Biko, the assassination of the Cradock Four and Pebco Three, the massacre at Bisho, and the Motherwell bomb incident.

Of all those detained without trial in South Africa, one-third came from the eastern Cape. Why? Because the region was also the dumping ground for those soldiers who got out of hand during the bush war[1]—the veterans, black and white, of Koevoet and the notorious 101 and 32 Battalions. These men had to be kept out of the glare of the media, and at a distance from Parliament and human rights organizations. And their names cropped up during the first week of hearings in East London, always in connection with torture and murder: Gideon Nieuwoudt, Albert Ntungata, Eric Winter, Chris Labuschagne, Spyker van Wyk, Gert Strydom.

It was apparently assumed in security circles that whoever crushed the eastern Cape would control the country. The region still lives with the consequences. Despite the fact that Xhosa people dominate South African politics, this is the second poorest of the nine provinces, with 65 percent of the economically active population unemployed.

True to its spirit of resistance, the first attempts to stop the Truth Commission emanate from the eastern Cape. The Biko family file several cases to prove that the legislation is unconstitutional, while perpetrators from Port Elizabeth succeed in preventing the Truth Commission from allowing victims to name them.

It has to be this part of the country that turns us inside out, that renders us: bare lips. It has to be this region of fierce opposites—meadows and plains, waterfalls and *dongas*, ferns and aloes—that sparks from a

[1]During the late 1970s and through the 1980s, South Africa was almost constantly at war with the forces of SWAPO—the South West African People's Organization, dedicated to independence for Namibia. Koevoet was the name of a plainclothes police unit whose unorthodox methods against SWAPO won it a reputation as a killing machine doing the secret bidding of the South African Defense Force (SADF).

speechless darkness the voices of the past. And at long last, we can weep in the certainty of this April, in the assurance of the testimony of fellow South Africans.

It was the end of October—10 October 1985. She was on her way to work, two young men approached her. Now they were five. When they saw her, they chased her. She went to hide in another house, and now they took her out of that house.

They took her overall, and they poured gasoline over her. One of them held her feet and then they started igniting her feet. They were beating her up. There was nobody who could stop this, the police were looking for her, but they were lost and they couldn't find her. She tried to [take the police] to them . . . to the people who tried to hurt her, but they couldn't [understand her] because she didn't have a voice. The police took her to Bloemfontein.

In Bloemfontein she stayed for three days, and she started to mention everybody who did this to her. Then after that, she died. They didn't allow her to be buried in Colesberg, because they said she was an informer. They said if she was buried there, they were going to burn the church. Then she ended up being buried in Pilonome Hospital. That's where I will stop for a moment.

ADV. POTGIETER: Was there any truth in this allegation that she was an *impimpi*, an informer?

MRS. MALITI: That's how they got her, but the reason why they burnt her is because my uncle is a policeman.

ADV. NTSEBEZA: You said while this happened there was a boycott of the shops that time. Your mother's main offense was that she went to buy meat from the butchery—you will correct me if I am wrong . . . She tried to clear her name?

MRS. MALITI: Yes sir.

ADV. NTSEBEZA: According to the report that you gave to the people who were taking the statements earlier, she paid 100 rand.

MRS. MALITI: Yes.

ADV. NTSEBEZA: Where did she send this R100?

MRS. MALITI: She sent it to the comrades and the comrades announced it, that she did pay this R100 trying to ask for forgiveness for buying meat during a consumer boycott. They said they forgive her. Now she took this letter to the township.

ADV. NTSEBEZA: When she came back to the township, she was under the impression that she was forgiven?

MRS. MALITI: Yes.

ADV. NTSEBEZA: In other words . . . she was killed while she was still under the impression that she was safe, knowing that she was forgiven?

MRS. MALITI: Yes, that's so.

ADV. NTSEBEZA: When did the police come in?

MRS. MALITI: The police arrived when she was burnt already. When the police came in, they could—they were trying to find out where she was, but they could hear her crying. They saw her in the main road, she was already alight.

ADV. NTSEBEZA: Did she run after she was burnt?

MRS. MALITI: No, she couldn't run, she was just walking slowly, her clothes were burning. She went in the direction where the police were . . .

ADV. NTSEBEZA: Were the people afraid to help her?

MRS. MALITI: No one was allowed by the comrades to help her, so she went alone to the van.

ADV. NTSEBEZA: Were these comrades who were chasing people away?

MRS. MALITI: There were five of them—at the beginning there were too many, but at the end they were just five. One of them was Tifo Sihlaba . . . it was Tabo Gusha, Pinkdyaan Kelem, Toto Mayaba, Tembile Falati.

ADV. NTSEBEZA: What about Zolile Silwayane?

MRS. MALITI: Zolile Silwayane is the one who actually accepted the money, he is the leader of this whole situation. Yes, he is the one who announced that he had received the money, and he was the one who actually went back again and said she must be ignited.

ADV. NTSEBEZA: This is a very unique case from all the cases we have heard. We've been listening to cases where our people were being killed by police and the government, but now this is unique because our people are being killed by our own people at the same time. Do you know the husband to the deceased?

MRS. MALITI: Yes, I know his name is Doti. That day—he doesn't know anything because he ran. He ran to Crossroads, and even today he is not well since then.

ADV. NTSEBEZA: Just to clear something up, are you trying to say he was never well again mentally?

MRS. MALITI: Yes, that's what I am saying.

(Thomzama Maliti, testifying on the death of Nombulelo Delato)

The word "truth" makes me uncomfortable.

The word "truth" still trips the tongue.

"Your voice tightens up when you approach the word 'truth,' " the technical assistant says, irritated. "Repeat it twenty times so that you become familiar with it. *Truth is mos jou job!*" ("Truth is your job, after all!")

I hesitate at the word; I am not used to using it. Even when I type it, it ends up as either *turth* or *trth*. I have never bedded that word in a poem. I prefer the word "lie." The moment the lie raises its head, I smell blood. Because it is there . . . where the truth is closest.

The word "reconciliation," on the other hand, is my daily bread.

Compromise, accommodate, provide, make space for. Understand. Tolerate. Empathize. Endure . . . Without it, no relationship, no work, no progress, is possible. Yes. Piece by piece we die into reconciliation.

However—neither truth nor reconciliation is part of my graphite when sitting in front of a blank page, eraser close at hand. Everything else fades away. It becomes so quiet. Something opens and something falls into this quiet space. A tone, an image, a line, mobilizes completely. I become myself. Truth and reconciliation do not enter my anarchy. They choke on betrayal and rage; they fall off my refusal to be moral. I write the broken line. For some brief moments of loose-limbed happiness, everything I am, every shivering, otherwise useless, vulnerable fiber and hypersensitive sense, comes together. A heightened phase of clarity and the glue stays . . . and somewhat breathless, I know: for this I am made.

I am not made to report on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. When I was first told to head the five-person radio team covering the Truth Commission, I began to cry, inexplicably, on the plane back from Johannesburg. Someone tripped over my bag in the aisle. Mumbling excuses, fumbling with tissues, I looked up into the face of Dirk Coetzee. There was no escape.

After three days, a nervous breakdown was diagnosed. Two weeks later, the first hearings on human rights violations began in East London.

The months that have passed have proved my premonition right—reporting on the Truth Commission indeed leaves most of us physically exhausted and mentally frayed.

Because of language.

Week after week, from one faceless building to another, from one dusty, godforsaken town to another, the arteries of our past bleed their own peculiar rhythm, tone, and image. One cannot get rid of it. Ever.

To have the voices of ordinary people dominate the news. To have no one escape the process.

We sleep between one and two hours a night. We live on chocolate and potato chips. After five years without cigarettes, I start smoking again.

In the second week of hearings, I do a Question and Answer on a current affairs program. I stammer. I freeze. I am without language. I put the receiver down, and think: Resign. Now. You are clearly incompetent. The next morning, the Truth Commission sends one of its own counselors to address the journalists. "You will experience the same symptoms as the victims. You will find yourself powerless—without help, without words."

I am shocked to be a textbook case within a mere ten days.

"Exercise regularly. Take photographs of loved ones with you to come home to in the hotels. Take your favorite music with you. And talk to one another . . . be one another's therapists."

We develop techniques to lessen the impact. We no longer go into the halls where the hearings take place, because of the accumulated grief. We watch on the monitors provided. The moment someone starts crying, we start writing/scribbling/doodling.

One hotel room drifts into another. One breakfast buffet provides the same sad fruit as another. One sorrow-filled room flows into another. One rental car smells like another . . . but the language, the detail, the individual tone . . . it stays.

"I'm going to take the tale of Nomonde Calata and make a comic out of it," says my friend Professor Kondlo, the Xhosa intellectual from Grahamstown. "I will call it 'The Contestation of Spaces.' " It is late at night. We sit and drink in the sultry eastern Cape midnight. Outside the window, the dark sea pushes past white trails of mist.

"The first page of my comic will carry the headline 'The Past,' and it will have two drawings. In the one frame, I will write 'Male Storyteller (Historian)' and draw a group of men sitting in the traditional *kgotla* or *kroro* or *motse*—whatever you want to call it, that glamorous space in which men and boys meet each other. Where stories are told of where you come from, who you are, the structure of the group's male ancestry, who your role model is. The tales which interpret your world for you, and help the male tellers to take decisions about economics, politics, history.

"Frame two will have the caption 'Female Storyteller (Socializer of Children).' This drawing will show a space where food is prepared. Children of both genders sit and listen to the stories of make-believe. A flowing gallery of magical and bizarre moments that cut into everyday life. 'Are you awake? Are you listening?' asks the grandmother. The children must react and interact with the multidimensional performance. Unlike the stories of the men where boundaries are set, these stories undermine boundaries: men turn into women and vice versa, animals become people, women fall in love with animals, people eat each other, dreams and hallucinations are played out."

"I don't get it. The wife of Fort Calata really doesn't fit the stereotypical storytelling grandma by the *pappot* and the fire that you want to put in your comic."

"Exactly," says Professor Kondlo, and thumps his fist on the table. "Over these drawings, I rubber-stamp: MIGRATION, URBANIZATION, FORCED REMOVALS. And then starts the actual story of Nomonde Calata as a woman, sitting in the male space of the British colonial city hall of East London and relating a story as part of the official history of this country. It's bloody amazing!"

"Your introduction only handles the cultural aspect," I say. "Maybe you should draw Nomonde arriving at the city hall accompanied by the police who once persecuted her? Now her space is protected and officially demarcated for her—here she is safe. Then you start immediately where she testifies how the police burst into her house and arrested her husband . . ." I dig through my notes, but he is already playing the cassette:

> NOMONDE: My husband was in the room, he already had his clothes on, and he was wearing very warm clothes. Three policemen I can remember—Mr. Venter, Mr. Caio was a black man, it was Mr. Strauss who was wearing a uniform. He had a small stick in his hand. They were not very patient with him, they were pushing him . . . they were really making him to hurry. I merely requested, "Please, do not push him, do not handcuff him, because he's got a . . . chest . . . problem . . ." *[pause . . . a sob . . . an audible shuddering]*
>
> JOHN SMITH: Would you like some time, Mrs. Calata? Are you fine? . . . Let me assist you with this whole . . .
>
> NOMONDE: After leaving with him, they handcuffed him to the back, leaving with him *[clears throat]* because I was also waiting for a trial—the trial for wearing a T-shirt—I didn't know where he was taken to, I didn't know where they had taken him to . . .

"Why do you think she cried here specifically?" I ask.

"Maybe remembering her husband as vulnerable. Because one picks up from the testimony that they had a special relationship—he confided in her, they discussed everything, and when he didn't turn up on time that night, she knew at once that something was wrong. When she cries at the end, it is also because this friend of hers, the wife of Matthew Goniwe, is crying."

"But now this new space that Nomonde is sitting in—it isn't only physical, it's also metaphorical."

The professor smiles. "Yes. We're talking about two different social spaces: one in which violence was justified in the past. And the other, in the present, where abuses of human rights are condemned as immoral and wrong. By choosing the city hall in the center of town and not a community center in the township, the Truth Commission wants to portray a symbolic break with the institutional frameworks of the past. This city hall is no longer the official domain of whites and perpetrators: it now belongs to all of us."

> NOMONDE: In May, Fort was not around, he was in Johannesburg to see a physiotherapist, because he had this frozen shoulder. On 27 May in the early hours, I was woken up by the knock and the lights, the flashlights that were right in the house. And I went to open the door. Opening the door, I saw Mr. Venter and Mr. Gouws—and many other policemen, there were horses, SADF, it was just full. They entered my house and said they wanted to search. They got into my bedroom, they searched . . . they were looking for documents, UDF documents, they took everything. In their search, Mr.

Venter he asked me: "Where's your husband?" I said to him, "My husband is not here, he is in Gauteng." He was asking this in Afrikaans. *"Jy moet vir jou man sê, hy kan maar wegkruip en jy kan hom maar wegsteek, die dag as ons hom kry . . . dan sal hy kak."* ["Tell your husband he can hide away, you can help him to hide, but when we find him . . . he's going to shit."]

I was worried and I was scared. And at the same time, I was brave. I kept quiet and I looked at him. *"Jy sit op my bed—staan op."* ["You are sitting on my bed—get up."]

He stood up and he said, "What is this bed after all?" After that they left my house.

Matthew Goniwe arrived after the police had left. He said they visited all the executive members; they took all the documents from the members.

"After this testimony," says Kondlo excitedly, "I draw a page from a CIA handbook used in the early eighties to teach Latin American security forces how to extract information from prisoners. The purpose of this will be to explain the psychological underpinning of torture. The first step is to bring in a superior outside force. One of these outside forces is time: a person should be harassed at a time when he least expects it and when his mental and physical resistance are at its lowest—ideally in the early hours of the morning. When confronted at this time, most subjects experience intense feelings of shock, insecurity, and psychological stress and have great difficulty adjusting to the situation."

"What I find fascinating is the interaction with Venter about the bed. He invades her privacy, he sits on her bed—something only very intimate guests or children would usually do. While he's sitting there, he threatens her husband. Then she reclaims her space: you can do this and say that, she says . . . but you will *not* sit on my bed. Although he scoffs at it, he indeed gets up from the bed—despite himself, he respects their space!"

NOMONDE: In April, before Fort went to Johannesburg for this physiotherapist treatment, he arrived from a UDF meeting. It was at night. I was already in bed, but he woke me up. He said, "Nomonde, I have to tell you this." I said to him, "Speak." And he said: "We were detained with Matthew for a few hours in Port Elizabeth. We left Sparrow in the car, because we didn't want the car to be seen . . . A Security Branch [man] was sitting there . . . they were waiting for us. There was one of them who asked: *'Luitenant, moet ons dit nou doen?'* And he answered: *'Dis nog nie die regte tyd nie.'* ['Lieutenant, should we do it now?' . . . 'It's not the right time yet.'] They asked questions. At the same time, Matthew was being asked such questions . . ."

SMITH: Did your husband tell you what he understood those words to mean?

NOMONDE: Yes, he was able to explain, and said, "I think they plan something very big about us." They took it lightly, but they were unhappy and uncomfortable . . . And he expressed his shock about what he had heard.

"I wonder why Fort said: 'They plan something very "big" '? He makes it sound like a launch or something instead of a death."

"Maybe the translation is off the mark. But note that Nomonde is now testifying in a space made safe for her by the same police."

"You know, it's not necessarily the same policemen. I interviewed Sydney Mufamadi of Safety and Security and he said the regions were ordered to put together new groups to deal with security around the Truth Commission, people who are positive toward the new dispensation and not linked at all to past abuses."

"So: the inside of the hall. I will draw all the Truth Commission posters and that massive banner—all of this signifying to Nomonde that this space is owned by the commission and therefore safe and official. Safe for a political activist, safe for a woman and wife, official in its acknowledgment of her story as the truth and official in giving her the space to become a historian, a custodian of history despite her gender."

"We haven't even begun to understand what we're hearing. Do you remember where Nomonde describes waiting on the night of 27 June, when Fort, Matthew, Sparrow, and Sicelo went to a briefing in Port Elizabeth? How the abnormal situation with police watching the house has become normal, and when they're *not* there, it's abnormal?"

NOMONDE: At eleven I was anxious . . . I was unable to sleep because my husband was not yet back as he had promised. I knew that he was always being followed and harassed even when he went to

the OK, wherever he went he was harassed by the police. There was a reverend who visited our place on that weekend, and I woke him up and said I was uneasy . . . I went to the reverend's room and said: "I'm anxious because my husband is not yet here." He reassured me and said that probably he would be coming tomorrow morning because it was very late. Still I felt that, no, this was not the situation. He always reports when he is going to oversleep somewhere . . . He doesn't just do something without informing me. So I kept on. I was awake, I had insomnia. Usually when I looked out, there were Casspirs, there were vans, there were Casspirs even on the other streets, but that evening it was *[whispers]* quiet—there was not a car moving around as they usually do . . . but this was also an indication that something was wrong . . . I had this premonition, and I was highly expectant at the time. I still had insomnia. The following day, I woke up, but I was working under pressure because I was hopeful that probably the reassurance of the reverend might be true.

"But the way Nomonde found out about the death of her husband surpasses all fiction . . ."

NOMONDE: We [Nomonde and Nyameka Goniwe] were unhappy and we slept without knowing on Friday what had happened to our husbands. Usually the *Herald* was delivered to my home because I was distributing it. When the *Herald* was delivered, I looked at the headlines and one of my children said: "Mother, look here in the paper . . . the car belonging to my father has been burnt." At that moment, I was trembling, because I was afraid what might have happened to my husband—because if his car is burnt down like this, I was wondering what happened to him. I started distributing the papers as usual, but I was very upset during this time. After a few hours, some friends came in and took me and said I must be among the other people, and they said I must go to Nyami. Nyami was always there for me and I was only twenty at the time and I couldn't handle this . . . so I was taken to Nyami's place *[cries loudly while interpreter finishes]* and when I got there, Nyami was crying terribly . . . it affected me also . . .

SMITH: May I request the commission to adjourn maybe for a minute . . . I don't think the witness is in a condition to continue presently . . .

TUTU: Can we adjourn for ten minutes, please.

"For me, this crying is the beginning of the Truth Commission—the signature tune, the definitive moment, the ultimate sound of what the process is about. She was wearing this vivid orange-red dress, and she threw herself backward and that sound . . . that sound . . . it will haunt me for ever and ever."

"It's significant that she began to cry when she remembered how Nyameka Goniwe was crying when she arrived at the Goniwes' house. The academics say pain destroys language and this brings about an immediate reversion to a prelinguistic state—and to witness that cry was to witness the destruction of language . . . was to realize that to remember the past of this country is to be thrown back into a time before language. And to get that memory, to fix it in words, to capture it with the precise image, is to be present at the birth of language itself. But more practically, this particular memory at last captured in words can no longer haunt you, push you around, bewilder you, because you have taken control of it—you can move it wherever you want to. So maybe this is what the commission is all about—finding words for that cry of Nomonde Calata."

"When the hearing resumed, Tutu started to sing: *'Senzeni na, senzeni na* . . . What have we done? What have we done? Our only sin is the color of our skin.' I was at a meeting once where ANC leaders rejected this song because it perpetuates the idea of being a helpless victim. But when it was sung this morning, I cried with such a sense of loss and despair I could hardly breathe . . ."

"Listen how tired and resigned her voice sounds when she goes on with her story." Kondlo presses a button on my tape recorder.

NOMONDE: When I was at home, the reverend from my church visited me. He was there to explain that the bodies of Fort and Matthew were found. Well, we settled. At the time, I had my second child. This child was very close to the father—after hearing this news, the child was sick. I was pregnant at the time . . . I left that child that was inside of me . . . I don't know what happened on that day.

"At first I thought she was saying she had a miscarriage—but she obviously means this in a metaphorical sense. Because she mentions later that all her children were born in a natural way, but that this last one, a son, was a cesarean."

"And when she describes her visit to the doctor, she puts on this brave face again in front of the security police waiting for her there."

NOMONDE: He said to me, "Sister, you have to clean your face, you have to wipe out the tears, you have to be brave"—and I listened. And when they saw me, they saw a very strong person. I saw the doctor and then went home. Mr. Xoliwe is the man we asked as families to go and identify the bodies. He said, "Yes, we've seen the bodies, but I've discovered that the hair was pulled out. His [Fort's] tongue was very long. His fingers were cut off. He had many wounds in his body." When he looked at his trousers, he realized that the dogs had really bitten him very severely—he couldn't believe that the dogs had already had their share . . . Well, the funeral went on . . . I'm sure the chairman of this committee knows exactly the function . . .

Kondlo nods his head. "The funeral of the Cradock Four on 20 July 1985 changed the political landscape of this country forever. It was like a raging fire. ANC and SACP flags were defiantly displayed, buses and buses full of people turned up—a state of emergency was declared. But in a sense it was the real beginning of the end of apartheid."

"Two days after Mrs. Calata—why do I call her this now, when we've talked the whole time about Nomonde? Is it the horror of her testimony that has distanced her from me or do I simply feel humbled? Anyway, after the birth of her child, the security police turned up."

NOMONDE: The leader of those police was Mr. Labuschagne. He said: *"Hau . . . jy't 'n baba, sonner 'n pa . . . wil jy nie hê ons moet die pa wees van die baba nie? Ons kom deursoek die huis."* ["*Hau* . . . you've got a baby, without a father . . . don't you want us to be the father of the baby? We've come to search the house."] I kept quiet, I didn't give them an answer, but after a few minutes they came back. They said, "We want to evict you out of this house, because you don't have money to pay for your rent and we know for a fact that you don't have money . . . even in Fort's account there is no cent left." I didn't indicate whether I will move out or not. They repeated this. I said to them: "No, I'm not going out of this house, you will have to take your gun and shoot me and take me out of the house." Well, they stood up and left.

We had an inquest at New Brighton. The finding was that the court agrees they were killed, but there is not enough evidence as to who killed them. We stayed at home with no knowledge of what was happening until 1994—then there was a report in the *New Nation* newspaper and the inquest was reopened.

SMITH: Are you referring to the note where instructions were given for your husband to be removed from society—your husband and the other three?

NOMONDE: Yes. "They should be permanently removed from society as a matter of urgency . . ."

SMITH: Was the finding of the inquest that the security forces were responsible for the deaths, but it could not apportion blame either to the army or to the police?

"How could we lose our humanity like that? The word 'apartheid' suddenly sounds like a euphemism!" I battle with my voice.

"Whites," says Kondlo, throwing back the last of his drink with a grimace, "have no *ubuntu* . . . they choke on all their rights, but they have no human compassion. Look at this poor guy Webber who lost his left arm in an APLA attack. Why does he come alone every day? All the black victims are accompanied by their families and people from their communities. And Webber? Is it because he really has no one in the world, or is it because whites do not care about each other?"

Wordless, lost. While Afrikaner surnames like Barnard, Nieuwoudt, Van Zyl, Van Wyk, peel off victims' lips. The question they keep asking: What kind of person, what kind of human being, keeps another's hand in a fruit jar on his desk? What kind of hatred makes animals of people?

It is ordinary people who appear before the Truth Commission. People you meet daily in the street, on the bus and train—people with the signs of poverty and hard work on their bodies and their clothes. In their faces, you can read astonishment, bewilderment, sown by the cal-

lousness of the security police and the unfairness of the justice system. "We were treated like garbage: worse even than dogs. Even ants were treated better than us."

And everyone wants to know: Who? Why? Out of the sighing arises more than the need for facts or the longing to get closure on someone's life. The victims ask the hardest of all the questions: How is it possible that the person I loved so much lit no spark of humanity in you?

A mother stumbles onto the fact that her child is dead. She sends one child to go and buy fish. He hears on the street: "They shot your little brother just now."

The abnormality of South African society strikes Commissioner Mary Burton. "In a normal society, if your child is not at home on time, you think he might still be at his friend's. But under apartheid, you go and look at the police station, then at the jails, then at the hospital, and eventually at the morgue."

What gradually becomes clear is that the apartheid system worked like a finely woven net—starting with the Broederbond, who appointed leaders. In turn these leaders appointed ministers, judges, generals. Security forces, courts, administrations, were tangled in. Through Parliament, legislation was launched that would keep the brutal enforcement of apartheid out of sight.

It is striking that no politicians attend the hearings. Is it because they respect the independence of the commission, or do they simply not want to know what price ordinary people paid for the end of apartheid and the new dispensation? Many of those testifying are unemployed and live in squatter camps.

Now that people are able to tell their stories, the lid of the Pandora's box is lifted; for the first time, these individual truths sound unhindered in the ears of all South Africans. The black people in the audience are seldom upset. They have known the truth for years. The whites are often disconcerted: they didn't realize the magnitude of the outrage, the "depth of depravity," as Tutu calls it.

Where does the truth lie? What does it have to do with reconciliation and justice?

"For me, justice lies in the fact that everything is being laid out on the same table," says my colleague Mondli. "The truth that rules our fears, our deeds, and our dreams is coming to light. From now on, you don't only see a smiling black man in front of you, but you also know what I carry inside of me. I've always known it—now you also know."

"And reconciliation?"

"Reconciliation will only be possible when the dignity of black people has been restored and when whites become compassionate. Reconciliation and amnesty I don't find important. That people are able to tell their stories—that's the important thing."

"For me, it's a new beginning," I say. "It is not about skin color, culture, language, but about people. The personal pain puts an end to all stereotypes. Where we connect now has nothing to do with group or color, we connect with our humanity . . ." I keep quiet. Drunk or embarrassed.

"Let us drink to the end of three centuries of fractured morality," says Mondli, and lifts his glass. "Here people are finally breaking through to one another and you and I are experiencing it."

"And maybe this is how we should measure our success—if we manage to formulate a morality based on our common humanity."

Mondli laughs and says: "We're all starting to talk like Tutu."

Time and time again the name crops up: the A-Team of Tumahole, the township at Parys on the banks of the Vaal River. "I only heard there was this thing called the A-Team. They were people against the UDF. They used to drive through the township in their cars—they started this A-Team to work with the police. At night we saw police vans delivering booze to their houses. The A-Team wore their names on their chests, they carried hammers, pangas, and guns to bring death to their own community."

According to witnesses, the activities usually started on a Saturday afternoon. After drinking and taking some drugs, they would target their prey. Torture and killing were never part of their vocabulary; instead they took their victims to what they called "the Open Field"—all in the name of discipline.

David Nhlapo, an ordinary resident of Tumahole, says the A-Team picked him up one evening. They took him from Parys to Sasolburg. "That's where they put a tire on me, poured me with petrol, and they said I should be naked. I undressed myself and they said, 'You are now going to feel the pain the other policemen felt.' They sliced my friend's neck with a spade."

In stories about KwaZulu-Natal, the name of another gang often comes up—the Amabutho. They also had special attire that singled them out—balaclavas and colorful overalls. Their weapons were

knobkerries, spears, and axes, and they worked with Inkatha and the SADF. Their rituals were steeped in tradition. Before going after their victims, they drank and splashed on war potions to make themselves invincible. They also didn't speak of "killing," but used euphemistic phrases like "to remove obstacles" and "to purify the fields."

A survivor of one of their attacks remembers: "And one of the Amabuthos said: 'Let me see who has an ax . . .' and I heard they were chopping down our door and they were coming inside . . . I don't know when Kumbolani died because at that stage I was hiding. I wasn't hiding under the bed, because I realized if they find me under the bed, they will kill me more cruelly, they must kill me standing. So I stood behind the door and I was hiding, and they got inside, they chopped him . . . they chopped him in his face with an ax and on his chest . . . they opened up his chest with an ax."

The Amabutho often removed body parts to brew a concoction with which to cleanse themselves of the murder. The operational tactics of both the A-Team and the Amabutho echo some of the Vlakplaas rituals described by Dirk Coetzee. Men bonding in groups. Drinking, choosing a victim, arming themselves, and then getting together to make the Big Kill.

Tutu reads an anonymous letter in Afrikaans sent to the commission during the second week of hearings: *"Dan huil ek vir dit wat gebeur het, al kan ek niks daaraan verander nie. Dan soek ek in my binneste om te verstaan hoe is dit moontlik dat niemand eenvoudig geweet het nie, hoe is dit moontlik dat so min iets daaraan gedoen het, hoe is dit moontlik dat ek ook maar baie keer net toegekyk het. Dan wonder ek hoe is dit moontlik om met daardie skuld en skande van die binnekant te lewe . . . ek weet nie wat om te sê nie, ek weet nie wat om te doen nie, ek vra u hieroor om verskoning—ek is jammer vir al die pyn en die hartseer. Ek sê dit nie maklik nie. Ek sê dit met 'n hart wat stukkend is en met trane in my oe . . ."*

("Then I cry over what has happened, even though I cannot change anything. Then I look inside myself to understand how it is possible that no one knew, how it is possible that so few did something about it, how it is possible that often I also just looked on. Then I wonder how it is possible to live with this inner guilt and shame . . . I don't know what to say, I don't know what to do, I ask you to forgive me for this—I am sorry about all the pain and the heartache. It isn't easy to say this. I say it with a heart that is broken and tears in my eyes . . .")

. . .

The texts grow next to one another in the vapor of freshly mown language. Nomonde Calata, Priscilla Zantsi, Isabel Hofmeyr, Nontuthuzelo Mpehlo, Nqabakazi Godolozi, Elaine Scarry, Feziwe Mfeti, Nohle Mohape, Art Spiegelman, Govan Mbeki, Phyllis Maseko, Ariel Dorfman, Lucas Sikwepere, Abdulhay Jassat, Johan Smit, Ms. Mkhize and Ms. Khuzwayo, Marta Cullberg Weston, Cyril Mhlongo, Bheki Mlangeni's mother, Colette Franz, Yehuda Amichai.

Some journalists ask to be deployed elsewhere. Others start to focus on the perpetrators. Some storm out enraged at parties, or see friends fleeing from them. Some drink deep gulps of neat brandy; others calm themselves with neatly rolled *daggazolletjies*. After four months, most of us who travel frequently become ill—lungs and airways. The chairperson has bronchitis; the deputy chairperson, pneumonia. It's the planes, someone says; they are germ incubators. No, it's the constant adapting to different climates and altitudes. We are becoming a family. I board a tiny propeller plane and sit next to one of the interpreters. In the back sits the archbishop with his Anglican bodyguard. While we ascend shakily, I see how Tutu bows his head and prays, and I just know, somehow, we're going to be fine.

I walk into my home one evening. My family are excitedly watching cricket on television. They seem like a happy, close-knit group. I stand in the dark kitchen for a long time. Everything has become unconnected and unfamiliar. I realize that I don't know where the light switch is.

I can talk about nothing but the Truth Commission. Yet I don't talk about it at all.

Until the day in Queenstown. It is bitterly cold. Coated, scarved, we listen to one necklacing[2] experience after another—grim stories, a relentless procession of faces in a monotonous rhythm.

A man testifies about a bomb explosion in his restaurant. He says,

[2] "Necklacing" was a form of black-on-black violence that emerged in the mid-1980s. The "necklace" was a gasoline-filled rubber tire, first forced over the victim's head and shoulders, trapping his arms, then set on fire. It has been said before the Truth Commission that the first necklacing—of Maki Skosana—was instigated by third force elements, because there were television cameras on hand that immediately broadcast this terrible brutality around the world.

"The reason why only one person died that day is because of the top-quality tables that we have at the Spur."

And I start to laugh.

"My friend came to me and said: 'Lucas, I wanted to come to you . . .' "

". . . But I couldn't find my legs," I say to myself, and collapse with laughter.

A local journalist puts some tea in front of me and asks tentatively: "Have you been covering the commission for long?"

I take two weeks leave.

We tell stories not to die of life

The man sits alone. He is wearing a cheap jacket. In a formal, old-fashioned Afrikaans, he says he cannot tell the story of how an ANC bomb wiped out his family and friends.

"I can deal with it only in the form of questions. Do you know, you the Truth Commissioners, how a temperature feels of between six and eight thousand degrees? Do you know how it feels to experience a blow so intense that it forces the fillings from your teeth? Do you know how it feels to look for survivors and only find the dead and maimed . . . Do you know how it feels to look for your three-year-old child and never, Mr. Chairman, never to find him again and to keep wondering for the rest of your life where he is?"

Toward the end of the eighties, the Van Eck and De Neyschen families went on holiday on a game farm near Messina on the northern border of South Africa. One afternoon the two families went out in the bakkie to look for game. The back wheel on the right—the exact spot where the three-year-old Van Eck boy was sitting—struck a land mine.

"We were immediately in flames. When I came to myself, I saw my baby boy of eighteen months was still alive . . . he was lying still, but looking at me. Mr. De Neyschen was lying on his steering wheel . . . his hair burning, blood spouting from his forehead."

Van Eck pulled them all through the window, and then he went to look for survivors.

"Right behind the vehicle, I found my wife and Martie de Neyschen. Both severely maimed and killed outright. I searched further. I came upon little Kobus de Neyschen, who had some life in him. I went back to his father and said: 'The child is still alive, but severely maimed and burnt.' His father asked there on the scene to let his child go . . . which is what happened. Then I noticed Mr. De Neyschen's daughter Lizelda walking toward us out of the veld . . . She had a cut across her face and she limped. Then I searched further for my son of three years, but could not find him . . . until today I could not find him . . . I and my son buried our two family members and the next day our two friends. Since then it has been down the hill for me all the way. I sit for days . . . I simply sit . . . I lost my business. I am reduced to a poor white."

The small side-hall accommodates the electronic media. The translation is channeled to our tape recorders. We see Van Eck on the monitor. I write the news copy. I decide on a sound bite. I dictate the hard copy over the phone. I read: ". . . and never comma Mister Chairman comma never to find . . ." A catch in my voice . . . My throat throbs heavily. My breast silts up, speechless.

I give the phone to a colleague and flee blindly among the cables and electronic equipment . . . out onto the veranda overlooking Nelspruit. I gasp for breath. Like two underwater swimmers, my eyes burst out to the horizons . . . the mountains lit in a blushing light-blue hedge of peace. I am drowning. My eyes claw at the trees, the kloofs . . . see, smell . . . the landscape of paradise and a language from paradise: *"Mispel, maroela, tarentaal,"* I whisper. The air is drowsy with jasmine and *kanferfoelie.* I sit down on the steps and everything tears out of me. Flesh and blood can in the end only endure so much . . . Every week we are stretched thinner and thinner over different pitches of grief . . . How many people can one see crying, how much sorrow wrenched loose can one accommodate . . . and how does one get rid of the specific intonation of the words? It stays and stays.

I wake up in unfamiliar beds with blood on my flayed lips . . . and sound bites screaming in my ears.

I receive a call. "They say the story is really powerful . . . Can we possibly send another sound bite? Shall we send the one about the fillings or the one about the daughter coming toward them?"

I wipe my face. "Send the one about how he just sits—and remember to add that the newspapers of the day said pieces of his son's hair and eyes were found in a tree near the bakkie."

My hair is falling out. My teeth are falling out. I have rashes. After the amnesty deadline, I enter my house like a stranger. And barren. I sit around for days. Staring. My youngest walks into a room and starts. "Sorry, I'm not used to you being home."

No poetry should come forth from this. May my hand fall off if I write this.

So I sit around. Naturally and unnaturally without words. Stunned by the knowledge of the price people have paid for their words. If I write this, I exploit and betray. If I don't, I die. Suddenly my grandmother's motto comes to mind: When in despair, bake a cake. To bake a cake is a restorative process.

I snip into a bowl glacé pineapple, watermelon, ginger, green figs, dates, and walnuts. Big red and green cherries, currants, sultanas. I let it stand in a cool, dark cupboard—a bowl full of glistening jewels soaking in brandy. I relish the velvet of twelve eggs, butter, and sugar. I bake a fruit cake and eat small fragrant slices in the blinding blue Cape summer heat.

And I think up delicious lines of lies and revenge.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Narrative of Betrayal Has to Be Reinvented Every Time

DR. BORAINE: Mr. Snayer, Basil—where did Anton stay before he was killed?

MR. SNAYER: At the house next to mine.

DR. BORAINE: So you at that time—on that night in November 1989, early morning—you didn't really know that he was there?

MR. SNAYER: No, I had no idea.

DR. BORAINE: Okay, thank you. Now you have told us that you heard shots being fired—approximately what time was it when you first heard that?

MR. SNAYER: It must have been between about twelve-thirty and twelve forty-five in the morning. I remember that because I had been out rehearsing with the band I play for. Until about twelve o'clock. I came home, found my wife in the kitchen baking cookies, because that was the day of my eldest daughter's birthday, eleventh birthday. *Ja*, I was terrified and, of course, one immediately reacts to that, and the proximity of the sound immediately made me and my wife fall flat on the kitchen floor and I made my way to the telephone—phoned my neighbor. His response to me was that there could be a shooting—between people either in his backyard or just outside in the street. My wife, while I was in the bedrooms of my children, taking the boys out of the room which was the closest to where I heard the shots, and taking them away from there to a back room where my daughters were—my wife had phoned the Athlone police station and the response from the police station was that she needn't worry, they knew all about what was going on.

And that obviously made me more terrified because of how I began to interpret things from that point onward. I made my own deduction it