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Passages and Parallels: Forty Days in Cape Town

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Introduction

Ever since I was a little girl, I've wanted to travel to South Africa, and during the summer of 2010, I was given the opportunity to volunteer in Cape Town. I decided to go, but as it's incredibly expensive to just go to South Africa, I fund-raised. I sent letters to everyone I knew, informing them of my cause - Make a Difference with Catherine! Send her to South Africa! - and asking for donations to my South African venture instead of birthday presents that year. And then I flew off to teach in a preschool in one South African township, Khayelitsha.

After I returned home, I collected my bags, went through customs, and was greeted by my welcome-home committee: my mother and one of my brothers. That night my mother treated me to dinner at my favorite restaurant. My second night home, my brother and I went to a football game. We went drinking afterwards to celebrate our team's victory on home field. As I tried to sleep that night, I looked around my room to let America sink back in. These fairly typical activities seemed so foreign to me. In South Africa, I had gone out to eat, I had talked to my mother on the phone fairly regularly, and I had even gone to a rugby game. The team we were rooting for, Western Province Vodacom, had won, and we

had gone out afterwards to celebrate the victory. The parallels were there, but these activities felt so strange at home. To think that I was resuming my normal life, while so many people would never experience the things I had, was too bizarre. To think I was in Khayelitsha and then I was back home, proved to me my own freedoms and mobility.

My skin color, my gender, and my nationality contributed to my struggle in the United States and in South Africa. I did not realize that we, South Africans and myself, were othering¹ each other. I was othering South Africans, inadvertently, because I believed that, due to my American upbringing,² I would be able to solve their problems in an educare³ classroom. I did not know that the teachers were township women with no formal training, nor did I think they would be fairly unreceptive to changing their ways. They needed a helping hand not a

¹ "Othering" is a term found in postcolonial theory. It is defined as "a different paradigm in which identities are no longer starkly oppositional or exclusively singular but defined by their intricate and mutual relations with others" (Robert J.C. Young, "What is the Postcolonial?," *Ariel* vol. 40 (2009) p.15). Those of different backgrounds become at odds with each other, because neither understands the other. Both groups are looking to change the other, explicitly or implicitly.

² My upbringing as a white American afforded me many privileges, such as receiving an education and being able to go to South Africa. I was able to take advantage of opportunities that many in the world are not afforded.

³ An educare is a daycare for children in kindergarten (or the Receiving class, as it is called in South Africa) and younger, that has an educational aspect.

savior. However, the South Africans I encountered othered me as well by making assumptions about my history. What many of them, particularly the educare teachers, did not understand was that although I am from the West, it was not my conscious intention to remedy their little school. My desire was for us to work together, to create a better environment for everyone involved.

“The work of the postcolonial will only end when there are no unjust and unaccountable hierarchies of power in the world, when there are no forms of exclusions, no insides to which others are outsiders”.⁴ The postcolonial “involv[es] what we might simply refer to as the aftermath of the colonial. The situations and problems that have followed decolonization...are then encompassed in the term postcoloniality”.⁵ South Africa has a long journey to the termination of the aftermath of colonialism and othering. Since the end of the apartheid, a new class structure has emerged: one with the new black elite. Every South African citizen has been working on creating a new identity, individual and collective, to establish the new South Africa as an open and accepting country. “Being African is not based on beliefs or culture; rather it is

⁴ Robert J.C. Young, “What is the Postcolonial?,” *Ariel* vol. 40 (2009) p.17.

⁵ Robert J.C. Young, “What is the Postcolonial?,” *Ariel* vol. 40 (2009) p.13.

formed and informed by political, geographic and economic realities".⁶

However, this exploration of identities has led to a culture of oversensitivity, which leaves

"...The chattering classes to pursue a political agenda so correct it sometimes verged on insanity...almost everyone observed an unwritten law stating that it was unfair to criticize black people on the grounds that any failings they might exhibit were attributable to poverty, oppression and bad education, otherwise known as 'the legacy of apartheid'."⁷

In my quest to end my own postcolonial thinking and begin to explore my identity, I found Steven Otter, who wrote Khayelitsha⁸ about his own experiences while living in the same township in which I taught. Otter, a white South African journalist, moved to the black township in order to find an inexpensive place to live. As nervous as he was, ultimately living there proved to be a more enriching experience. He broke through the color lines and inserted himself into black South African life. For him, it wasn't an issue of color and race: he was more interested in just being a South African. Otter was "for the first time

⁶ Zakes Mda, "Creating a Continental Identity," *Business Day (South Africa)* (May, 26, 2009) p. 8.

⁷ Rian Malan, "South Africa: Did You Hear the One About Apartheid?," *Wall Street Journal* (August 9, 2008) p. W1.

⁸ Pronounced "Kaya-leet-sha."

expressing openly the desire to break down my inner prejudices and feel truly South African.”⁹ Just as I needed to give Khayelitsha and South Africa to others, Otter needed to convey to everyone, himself included, that black South Africans are only human.

As a journalist, Otter always absorbs his surroundings, but as a white man displaced in a black township, living an unfamiliar lifestyle, he is even more attentive to changes. He also takes chances with his writing. Instead of dancing around a subject, he expresses his feelings and thoughts succinctly. While explaining his own past with black South Africans, he picks apart the racial history of his home country:

“...Our kind had not only made the land in which we had settled a better place for all, but was responsible for introducing a touch of civilization and development to the lives of the savages around us. Not only had we discovered South Africa, but we had also civilized the *kaffirs*¹⁰ that roamed it in so disorderly a fashion.”¹¹

He is not disinclined to comment on South African history simply because he is white. If anything, his skin color makes his words more powerful.

⁹Steven Otter, *Khayelitsha: uMlungu in a Township* (South Africa: Penguin Books, 2007) p. 2.

¹⁰ A *kaffir* is an Afrikaans derogatory term for a Bantu-speaking, or black, African.

¹¹ Otter, p. 72.

When I began this project with Don Weber, in tandem with a class on South African History and a seminar exploring the political imagination of contemporary South Africa, I had a different path in mind. I began my research believing I would write on South African education and the state of affairs within the South African school system. However, as I delved further into the country's history, issues, and literature, I found myself enthralled with the story South Africa has to tell. The more I read, the more I felt compelled to write about my own exploits in Cape Town; as I wrote them down, I found myself analyzing my work with what I was learning. Too many questions were raised for me, in country and through my research, that I needed to answer. As I began to answer South Africa's questions to me, questions about myself surfaced. I had no choice but to face them, head on.

Everything I read post-Africa furthered my thinking of my own adventures in, and affairs of, South Africa. While I had seen township life, I did not fully comprehend why the people lived in such abject poverty. Only after my return and my purposeful dive into the history, literature, and research was my sense of the South African world in which I lived deepened.

Otter's fearless writing inspired me to be more honest in my work. However, my own first attempts at this failed. Only after I made a moral commitment to honesty was I able to be true to myself. I could not allow myself to dis-include¹² certain aspects of my personality and character simply because I was apprehensive of judgment. Dis-inclusion implies a deliberate omission, while exclusion implies forgetfulness. If something is important to this narrative, I vowed I would not leave it out, no matter how painful.

This narrative serves three purposes. First, it is an exploration into the issues of post-apartheid South Africa, and second into my own personal history and how the two relate. Third, and perhaps most importantly, this narrative is the story of my own transformation and maturity into adulthood.

My time in South Africa had changed me in a way that I was unaware of until I was faced with situations only found at home. I wasn't certain how the transformation had occurred, but I did notice I was more patient with people, and grateful for my surroundings. Instead of feeling put upon and burdened, I was excited to tackle the problems in my life. I

¹² Dis-inclusion is not a concept that has been explained fully in academic research. However, it seemed to be the best way to describe my experiences.

believe I went to South Africa a child, and came back to the United States an adult. South Africa provided for me the social and emotional site I needed to grow.

The following pages juxtapose the social narrative of South Africa against my personal history. The country as a whole has a need: it has not yet recovered from the wounds of apartheid. The racial and class tensions are so detrimental to the health and prosperity of the country. Until the trauma left by the apartheid regime begins to heal, South Africa will continue to be a segregated and disjointed country. I have a need to help people and situations in order to ignore my own personal tragedies. Deep down, I have always believed that if I fix others - South Africa, students, children - I will ultimately fix myself and right the wrongs of my history.

My words are not meant to gain sympathy or shock-value. By vocalizing my history, I am consciously recognizing my flaws. I hope that, by calling attention to my need to fix, I will remember that it always leads to destruction. This has been my attempt to analyze the story of South Africa, my own history, and how Cape Town, more specifically Khayelitsha and Little Flowers Educare, helped me realize that only I can mend myself.

Spelling in English and isiXhosa: Floundering in Words

I sat between two white South Africans on the plane from London to Cape Town. One was returning from a business trip, the other was returning from her “winter home.” During June and July, she went back to London, to escape the rainiest months in South Africa.

The woman was older, and I assumed that she knew about apartheid. I began asking her questions about what life was like in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s, when the violence really began escalating. Her eyes glazed over; she turned her face away from me.

“I don’t remember much about apartheid,” she said, her accent a mix of British and South African English. “We didn’t know much of what was going on. We weren’t privy to the violence.” These words were spoken with such finality; I knew not to press it any further. The first South Africans I had met clearly were not interested in delving into the past and discussing it.

As we began our descent, the man sitting to my left allowed me to lean over and look out the window. The view as you land in Cape Town is breathtaking. We arrived early in the morning, as the sun was rising over Table Mountain, and the South Atlantic Ocean gleamed gold.

As I stepped off the plane and made my way toward South African Customs, my heart began to beat faster. *Don't tell people you are here to volunteer. Sometimes they aren't very receptive to receiving help.* These words rang in my ears. I didn't want to lie to the agents, but I didn't want them to hate me either.

My palms were sweating as I walked up to the agent who screamed, "Next!" I handed her my passport and a slip that had my information on it: who I was, why I was in the country.

"Why are you here?" She eyed me suspiciously.

"I'm here because..." I cleared my throat. "I'm here to see the country."

"And where will you be staying?"

I swallowed hard. Do I tell her that I was staying in Rondebosch with a volunteer organization? Do I lie? I had to think quickly. "I'm staying at the Green Elephant in Observatory." The name of the hostel fell out of my mouth before I could stop it.

"And how long will you be here?"

"A little over a month." Truth.

“And you plan on staying at the hostel the whole time.” It occurred to me that my story was not very believable.

“Yes, ma’am. I might travel a little here and there, and maybe stay with friends.” Lies, lies, lies. Dread filled my mind as she stood staring at me.

She stamped my passport and handed it back to me. She then smiled widely and said, “Enjoy your stay in our beautiful country.” I sighed deeply with relief as I walked to the baggage area.

Being in South Africa was like a dream for me. When I was eight, I saw a television show all about South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.¹³ Ever since, I’d wanted to be there, no matter what it took. Thirteen years later, there I was, riding through Cape Town, gazing at the landscape before me.

Even though I had seen images of the shanty houses and naked children playing in the streets, I was still convinced that the townships would be something like a typical American ghetto: trash ridden streets

¹³ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed in 1997, after the abolishment of apartheid. It served as a vehicle for all South Africans to confess their wrongdoings under the apartheid regime, without fear of incarceration. The TRC stood for amnesty and forgiveness, along with absolute honesty.

and Section 8 Housing. None of the books I had read nor the movies I had watched before my arrival in Cape Town could have prepared me for what I was to confront.



The desolation in Khayelitsha

The first time I breathed township air, I smelled a mixture of paraffin wax, cooking lamb flesh, and garbage. Refuse littered the streets and gutters. Fires for cooking were started in empty metal trash barrels. Cows and sheep grazed on meager grass by the side of the roads. Feral dogs ran from house to *shebeen*¹⁴ and back to house in search of food scraps. The visuals were awfully stunning, but if you aren't prepared for the odor, you'll gag. I did, and I thought I was prepared.

¹⁴ A *shebeen* is an informal, unlicensed bar located in the townships. Homemade beer is typically sold in *shebeens*.

The poverty, the filth, and the smell found in all the South African townships make the settlements difficult to differentiate, especially to an untrained eye like mine. It's like how people see American suburbs: cookie cutter and uniform. While there is nothing uniform or clean about a township, a tourist can feel that they are the same. Tiny shacks are made of aluminum siding; tarps are used as roofs, held in place by stones; boxcars get converted into stores and *shebeens*. The townships are ever expanding, what with the constant influx of people arriving from the rural areas looking for work, causing cramped living spaces.

No real enforced building codes exist, and many properly built buildings deteriorate quickly and are in shabby condition. Upon first glance, the classroom in which I taught at Little Flowers Educare in Khayelitsha looked more like a prison than anything. Dingy, sand-saturated, blue industrial carpet covered the floor, and sky blue paint peeled from the walls. Posters on personal hygiene and pinups in isiXhosa¹⁵ depicting sharing were hung on the walls. Gates with padlocks

¹⁵ isiXhosa, pronounced "iss-ee KOH-suh," is one of eleven national languages in South Africa, and is the language of the amaXhosa people. In Khayelitsha, isiXhosa is the primary spoken language.

were in front of the two entrances of the classroom, and bars covered the windows. Stacks of white plastic chairs lined a wall.

The classroom, one room split down the middle, housed about forty-five five-year-olds. The space was separated by rolling cabinets which rarely stayed in place. Each half of the classroom had eight plastic tables - two red, two blue, two green, and two yellow. Most days, I had no fewer than twenty-five kids to teach.

Even though we were in the same room, I did not know many of the children in the other class. First, they had their own volunteer, Cynthia. Second, their teacher did not like me very much. Third, I had my own kids to keep an eye on. I had to learn thirty names, what to do when the children would scream, and what "*ithoyilethi*" means in isiXhosa. "Toilet." I figured that out very quickly. They would look up at me, their eyes watering, while slightly bent over and rocking their feet. Like laughter and tears, the Pee Dance is universal.

My first day at Little Flowers was so hectic that I nearly cried on the way back to home base. That morning, Luann, one of the directors of the volunteer program, had ridden in the van with us, to help us all feel comfortable in, and understand, our roles as volunteers. My legs bounced

the entire way to Khayelitsha - I was so nervous I thought I was going to jump out of my skin.

When we pulled up to the creche,¹⁶ Luann hopped out of the front seat. Cynthia and I slid out of the van and Wonga, our driver, looked at me, smiling. "Have a good day," he said, his thick isiXhosa accent spilling over the words. Luann walked us through the gate, which had a slide lock. *Children could so easily get out of that*, I thought to myself.

On the other side of the gate was a driveway, surrounded by six one-roomed buildings forming a U shape. There were two cars parked in the car port. The van belonged to the school and had a sign in the rear window: *If seen more than 50 kilometers from Cape Town, call the police. This vehicle has been stolen.* The other car was unmarked.

We passed a little garden overgrown with weeds and walked into the first building on our right - the school's office. Uniform policies, school rules, and copier regulations hung on the walls. The principal's desk was behind a door with steel bars and an open padlock. Luann looked at the woman sitting behind the desk. She wore the traditional

¹⁶ A creche is a daycare center for young children. Creches, such as Little Flowers, that also have an educational component are called educare centers.

headdress of a married amaXhosa woman - a scarf wrapped tightly around the head. She looked up at Luann and smiled.

"You're not Pumla," Luann said, her cheer nearly hiding trace amounts of her confusion.

"No, I am not," the woman said. "Pumla is ill."

"I see." Luann's Afrikaans accent sounded so harsh next to the humming isiXhosa. "These are two volunteers from America. They've been placed here."

"Yes," the woman said, smiling broadly. "Come with me." As we followed her out of the building, Luann waved farewell. I waved back at her, and to Wonga. He nodded towards me. I watched them drive away as a man approached us.

"Mama,¹⁷ who are these two?" he said to the woman with us.

"Tata," she responded, "these are volunteers from America." She pronounced it *ah-MER-ricah*, with heavily rolled "R's."

"Molo, Sisi,¹⁸" he said, grasping my hand. Suddenly I found myself in an awkward situation: I didn't know the standard South African

¹⁷ In isiXhosa, everyone is addressed as mother, father, sister, brother, aunt or uncle, depending on age. This is an important sign of respect.

¹⁸ *Mama* means Mother. *Tata* means Father. *Molo, Sisi* means "Hello, Sister."

handshake. I felt my hand go limp as my fingers were twisted awkwardly by his massive palm. He spoke to the woman in isiXhosa as he manipulated my fingers. I stood there dumbstruck at my first formal South African greeting as Cynthia stuck her hand out and introduced herself. He simply looked at her, placed his hand on my back, and wheeled us into the room next to the office.

The instant we walked into the classroom, yells erupted from the children, and the adults accompanying us disappeared. Misiwe and Nelly, the two teachers in the room, had to scream to get the children to quiet down. Misiwe, a short, stout woman in her mid-twenties, chose me; Cynthia walked to the other side of the classroom.

The children were instructed to sit on the floor and formally introduce themselves. Each child had to say his or her name and age, in English. Their little mouths moved so quickly that I found myself lost in the mixed up English ages and Xhosa names. I smiled stupidly until Misiwe clapped her hands and each child scrambled to his or her seat. I walked over to the stacks of white plastic chairs where Misiwe was sitting. "So, what happens next?" I asked her.

She looked at me and smiled, her beady eyes merely slits. “Well, Teacher, now you teach.” She picked up her phone and began sending SMS messages.¹⁹ I was stunned. As I looked at each child’s face, fear crept up my body, starting in the tips of my toes until I felt the hairs on the back of my neck standing up. I glanced across the room where Nelly was introducing Cynthia to her class, and showing her the classroom supplies. I asked Misiwe if she could give me a similar tour. I didn’t think I could do it on my own. She looked at me again, but this time the smile had left her lips.

“Teacher. You will find things on your own. You do not need me. This is your classroom.” I stared at her. *Well, here goes nothing*, I thought. I walked to where I thought the front of the classroom would be, by the door, and tried clapping as I had seen Misiwe do. Nothing happened; the children kept talking. I tried yelling to get their attention, but nothing was working. My voice was lost in mass of the sound of little tongues producing little clicks. Eventually Misiwe, who had been laughing quietly to herself, yelled, “*Ukuthula!*” The children were instantly silenced. Their faces were all directed at Misiwe, who, in turn, was pointing at me.

¹⁹ SMS messages are the same as text messages in the States.

I stumbled over my words as I began to teach. I could only assume that these kids didn't know very much, as they were only five or so. But I had no idea what they had learned thus far, and Misiwe was of no help. I decided we were going to try to count to ten as a group, and found bottle caps and bits of plastic with which the kids could count. They would hold up a piece of plastic for each number. I realized their hands were too small to hold up all ten pieces, so I clumsily instructed them to lay the pieces on their tables. It took fifteen minutes to count to ten. Each child wanted me to go around and give him/her my approval.

I placed a piece of white paper in front of each child, and passed around a tub full of broken crayons. We were going to write the alphabet. I moved to the little chalkboard easel, and wrote the letter A. "A," I said.

"A!" Thirty voices screamed back. Getting the kids to repeat the letters was the easy part. Getting them to write the letters proved more challenging. Different groups of children were on different developmental levels. The kids who sat at the Green Table were the slowest of the class. Next in line was the Yellow Table, followed by the Red Table. Those at the Blue Table always finished their work very quickly and with little difficulty, which made uniting the class problematic. In order to move on

to letter B, I had to help seven different kids, all the while trying to control those who only wanted to play. Who wants to learn when there is someone new in the room? It simply felt impossible to keep everyone working together.

Unathi, who is left handed, didn't even know how to hold his crayon correctly. He would grip it in his fist, and attempt to make the lines needed for the A. Then he would squeak, "Teacher!" I would go over to his table, hover over him, cover his hand in mine, and trace the letter so he could understand the way it feels to make an A. I did this with him for every letter.

By the time we got to the end of the alphabet, an hour and a half had passed, and it was time for chips, or snacks. I had said "Excellent" so often that the kids were repeating it.

"Ex-SAY-Lahnt!" They would call back to me after I said it to them. I wrote Excellent on the board so they could see how it was spelled.

As I watched the children munch on their various snacks, I began to think of the classroom structure. The problem in this classroom wasn't only playful children, or a disparity in learning levels. The problem was

that there weren't enough resources or helping hands at the preschool for the teachers to teach every child effectively.

After chips, it was outside time. Some grabbed toys, such as shovels, balls, or hula hoops, while others just ran off screaming. I was pulled to the playground behind the buildings and facing the streets of Khayelitsha. I had seen the playground from the van as we had driven up that morning, but seeing it up close was different. Shards of glass glistened in the sunlight around cigarette butts dropped in the sand. Chicken bones and pieces of plastic littered the area around the jungle gym. Old tires were used to create some sort of framework to the whole area. The kids were not supposed to get too close to the barbed wire fence, but they did anyway.

I stood in the center of the playground, taking it all in, when someone leapt onto my back. There was a rascally giggle in my ear. I reached behind me and felt little hair puffs on my fingers. Even though I didn't know her name, I knew it was Azazole.²⁰ As she wrapped her arms around my neck, I smiled mischievously. Neighing like a horse, I took off running. Azazole squealed loudly and I could hear the kids screaming

²⁰ Pronounced Az-az-olé.

behind me as they chased us. When I reached the starting place, by the sand pit, there were at least eight kids screaming, “Teacher! Teacher!” up at me. I placed my finger on each forehead as I called out a number.

“1!” “2!” “3!” As soon as they were given a number, the children would run off shouting out loud their place in line. I picked up Siyakha²¹ and ran with him.

Joyous shockwaves of pain continuously rushed my whole body by the time I heard Misiwe shout, “Teacher! Transport!” Wonga had pulled up to the school. I felt a sense of relief as Cynthia and I clambered into our seats.

When we got back to home base, I got right to work searching for activities for the next day. I would not go to Little Flowers unprepared again. T, one of the placement coordinators, saw me frantically digging through the drawers in the craft room. Her first name was really Tahira, but she preferred to be called “T.” She pulled me aside to talk about how my first day had gone. I looked into her soft brown eyes and told her what happened with my teacher. Before I knew it, I was crying.

²¹ Pronounced See-ah-kuh.

As the tears flowed freely, I confided in her, “What if I can’t do this, T? What if I’m just not strong enough to do this? How can I possibly talk to children who don’t even speak my language? What am I supposed to say to them? How will we understand each other? I feel like my teacher hates me. She’s no help at all! How am I supposed to do this?”

My tears were not over my worry that I would be unable to work in the classroom. I’d taught in hard situations before. Back home, I’d been a tutor for at-risk youth who had failed their benchmark exams. The Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skill (TAKS) is the standardized test that allows children to advance in school. If you don’t do well on your tests, you can’t move to the next grade. If you don’t pass your senior year TAKS test, you don’t graduate.²² Simple as that.

I’d worked with a fifth grader who had been held back twice, and was too disruptive to stay in the classroom. When I left him, he had not only passed his TAKS test and progressed to sixth grade, he also scored so high on his math test that he was commended by the state of Texas.

I’d taught another fifth grader how to read. When I first started seeing that particular child, it took him an hour and a half to get through

²² Texas Administrative Code. Title 19, Part 2, Chapter 101, Subchapter A, Rule Sec. 101.7.

Dr. Seuss' Fox in Sox. By the end of the school year, he was reading chapter books, albeit slowly.

I'd taught African refugee high school students, who spent all their free time taking care of their families, proper English grammar.

I felt like I could work miracles when it came to teaching.

Thus, my tears were not about feeling like I was failing. I did not understand why Misiwe was treating me with such disregard. In my mind, I was only there to help her, and nothing else. Without her help, I could not fix anything in the classroom. My childlike self did not know how to cope with Misiwe's animosity towards me, nor did it know how to not fix a situation. I was at a loss.

T was patient as I finished crying. I took a deep breath, wiped my eyes, and tried to compose myself. Her face then split in two as she looked at me. "Dear," she said to me, rolling her r, "only a few think they can do this at first. Those are the ones who have the hardest time. You must accept that this will be a struggle for both you and your teacher. Fear and frustration will give you the drive you need to continue on." She leaned in to hug me. She blanketed me in her warm security, and I resisted the urge to cry again.

As we climbed into the van the next morning, tensions were raised. Everyone was eager to see how their second day would go - would it be better or worse? Cynthia asked me what I was going to do with my class that day. I told her that I had planned an activity that involved colors, shapes, and names. Each child could choose what color and what shape he or she wanted, and I would make a personal name tag.

As she slipped her Versace sunglasses onto her nose, she informed me that I should just give her my bag of supplies and she would do the activity first, because she had fewer kids in her class. And then, when she was finished, I could have the materials back.

I was livid. I looked at her and spat, "Well, I only brought enough paper for my class, so that's not going to work for me." I had spent all evening planning this activity, and she was just going to steal it from me? She laughed at me, in an effort to make me feel foolish.

"I don't care," she said.

I felt as if someone had lit a match in my stomach. I wanted to spray her with fiery words. "I don't care that you don't care. I planned this activity. If you want to plan something we both can do together, then

fine. But that needs to be talked about beforehand. Not on the way to placement,” I snapped.

“Okay, Catherine. Clearly your mother never taught you any manners.”

“Do you speak to your child this way, Cynthia? Because I don’t see a lack of manners on my part. You are the one who is out of line.”

She had a daughter my age, but that did not give her to right speak to me in such a patronizing way. Her entitlement and her complete lack of respect was appalling.

Her laughter filled my burning ears.

I was fuming, but I knew it was too early in the morning for fighting. Cynthia, with her Coach flats, Rolex watch, and diamond ring the size of my thumb nail, was not someone who was used to hearing, “No.” I had no problem being one of the few to stand up to her condescension. I just didn’t want the entire van to be witness to our conflict. I shut my mouth and watched the sun rise over the highway as we entered Khayelitsha.



Sunrise in Khayelitsha

As I ignored Cynthia, I thought of our isiXhosa lesson from the night before. Our teacher Liulemile insisted we learn how to say, “Good Morning Children” (*Molweni abantwana*) and “Hello, my name is Catherine. And yours?” (*Molo, igama lam nguCatherine. Wena?*) I was shy about saying it, but he insisted.

“Your children will love it,” he promised. I gave him my word that I would greet my class and introduce myself from now on in isiXhosa.

It’s true that all the kids were thrilled when I greeted them the following morning in isiXhosa. However, to their five-year old brains the logical leap was that I was now fluent. They started having full blown

conversations with me, and before I could set my bag down my head was spinning.

I put my hands in the air and shouted, “Woah! Woah! Woah!”

Thirty pairs of hands followed mine into the air. “Woah! Woah! Woah!” Thirty voices roared back at me. I looked at them with their hands in the air and couldn’t stop myself from laughing. I laughed so hard my eyes began to tear up, and I had to take a sip of water. The kids looked at each other mildly confused. They didn’t understand that I was laughing not at them but at the situation. They thought that because I could greet them in their native language that I had somehow learned how to communicate with them.

Liulemile had not prepared me for this situation. I pulled my folded up notes from my back pocket and plainly said, “*Ndithetha isiXhosa chancing!*” (roughly, ‘I do not speak isiXhosa’), my tongue struggling to make the clicks of the “x” and “c.” I blushed as the children sat down, looking slightly dejected. Misiwe smiled at me, but to me it was a sneer. It was only my second day, yet my paranoia ran deep.

During playtime when I was outside, I decided to give my newfound mediocre isiXhosa skills another shot. I went up to a child I

had not seen before and introduced myself. She looked to be about two and a half years old. I squatted down to her level. She had one finger in her nose, and two fingers in her mouth. *“Molo, igama lam ngu Catherine. Wena?”*

She just stared at me. I was taken aback. I was told that whenever I introduced myself to someone, that person would respond. She turned her head to one side, still sucking on her fingers, taking me in. After a minute, she put her slobbery fingers in my hair and smiled at me. Snot began trickling down her face, but at least she recognized that I was a friend.

The third day, before I had gotten used to Misiwe’s terse answers, I was still stunned that she would leave me alone. I did need her with me in the classroom. When she left, my palms began to sweat uncontrollably. With each step I took from the door to the chalkboard easel, I had to pull my feet from the ground as if my feet had grown roots to keep me in place. I felt deserted. I wiped my brow, took a deep breath, plastered on a smile, and turned around.

“Okay!” I yelled over the commotion of thirty chattering children. They all turned toward me, but the noise barely died down. “Alphabet!” Instead of recognition, I received thirty blank stares. I hastily ran across the room, which took me about five strides, and passed out crayons and pieces of paper. I returned to the board, and wrote the letter A. “A. Apple.” I turned around.

I pointed to the board, and repeated. “A. Apple.” Silence. Cynthia’s side of the room was loud, but there was not a peep from the kids before me. They simply looked at each other, and then back at me. “A. Apple,” I pleaded as I jabbed my finger into the board.

Suddenly, a shout that nearly knocked me over erupted from tiny mouths. “A. APPLE.” Each child spewed the words at the same moment, and my eyes began watering from pride and relief.

* * * * *

On the rides home, while everyone was talking about their day, I always sat quietly and looked out the window at the passing landscape full of cows, dead grass, and boxcar buildings. The desolation was a perfect image for my inner turmoil. It seemed that I was losing who I was, but was gaining something new. There was this new need, a new desire,

to learn and understand people. But first I needed to cross the vast wasteland that was my insecurity, my own inner Khayelitsha.

I was determined to figure out why Misiwe was so hostile towards me. *What have I done to her?* I kept thinking. I was convinced it was because of my skin color, and what that meant. I was white, and she was not. She and her family had suffered through apartheid, even though she had probably only been a child herself when it ended. The effects of the regime were long-lasting, and my presence was a reminder that South Africa still needed help.

For Misiwe, Khayelitsha was life. I knew she would never fully leave the glass covered yards and the trash filled streets when she went home. She did not have the luxury of escape, as I had. At the end of each day, we went back to home base. It was a comfy yellow house in Rondebosch,²³ a suburb of Cape Town. Every day, we had three cooked meals, an endless supply of coffee and snacks, and fresh linens. Home base even had its own security. At the end of my few short weeks in Misiwe's school and country, I would leave. I would head back to my own world, my own issues.

²³ Pronounced Rond-eh-bosh.

As a result of my short-lived stay, I felt like Misiwe viewed me as a passive oppressor. My inactivity, my complacency, was almost worse than actively abusing her and her people. Save for the time I was there, I was not helping Misiwe or her country. Accepting my ultimate complacency was the biggest sin of all. It is like what Ghandi said: "Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as is cooperation with good."²⁴

As it turned out, I didn't know as much about South African issues as I originally had thought. But how could I? I am not South African. I was only a little girl trying to do something good for a place I believed needed my help. Yet I was met with hostility from people who are free in the loosest sense of the word. They have liberties, but no mobility. They have rights but more hardship. I had no control over my birth-given freedoms; they had simply been handed to me. True, my lineage had seen its own hardships. My Irish family had survived the Potato Famine before emigrating to the States. My Italian ancestors escaped persecution in Albania. But Misiwe couldn't see that part of me. No one can. It is part of the hidden history we all share.

²⁴Sunanda Gandhi, *Gandhi's Words*,
<http://www2.fiu.edu/~fcf/Gandhi.quotes.html#COOPERATION> (June 18, 1996).

I honestly do not think she meant to treat me with such disregard at the beginning. Her actions towards me were not about me as a person but about what my presence meant to her and her way of life. Historically speaking, in South Africa, when white people came, it was a sign of further colonization. To many, my skin color represents oppression and unwanted change.

I was certain that her anger towards me was because she thought I had come to take over her classroom. In hindsight, it seems so arrogant of me to think that she would give me such power, but it is further proof of my naiveté. I could not see her situation through my clouded eyes. I was only able to think of myself. I was couldn't see the classroom from Misiwe's perspective: she was exhausted, and had limited supplies, yet here was this fresh, able-bodied person who was willing to help.

I saw her as taking advantage of me, and using my enthusiasm to enable her own laziness, instead of giving me the experience I desired. I wanted to be a helper, not a teacher. I wanted to play with kids and get hugs and kisses all day. I thought Misiwe was using me, but I know now it was not in a malicious way. Instead of giving me what I thought I wanted, she gave me what she somehow knew I needed.

But do actual work? I told myself I was interested, but at first I was not. I wanted to simply soak up Africa, but put in no effort. I thought my presence would be enough to make the situation in the school, in that particular classroom, better. I was the American. I was the Foreigner. I had seen things they had never seen, and done things they had never done, and probably never would do. I did not speak isiXhosa. I was not one of them. I thought I was the helper. But, in the words of Canadian dramatist Judith Rudakoff: "I was not simply an outsider: I was The Other."²⁵

I had assumed that when I got to Africa, I was going to be the big savior: I would be able to fix the school, and teach them about how to handle their own affairs in the classroom. We had been cautioned beforehand to leave all of our assumptions at the door, but this proved an impossible task. One cannot simply change one's entire way of thinking simply because another person asks one to do so. As humans, we think in terms in which we are taught. As Americans, we are unconsciously indoctrinated, on the whole, to believe we can fix the world's problems, no matter what. We stick our noses into the business of others, and rarely do

²⁵ Judith Rudakoff, "Somewhere, Over the Rainbow: White-Female-Canadian Dramaturge in Cape Town," *TDR* vol. 48 no. 1 (Spring, 2004): 126-163.

we expect to experience any consequences. When faced with a country like South Africa, whose past is riddled with colonialism and false saviors, we do not anticipate any negative repercussions, such as people not being open to receiving our help. We ignorantly assume that others will be grateful to us for aid that was not asked for. We never ask ourselves, *Do they really want our help at all? Or are we doing this because we need to fill a hole in our self-perception that has been created by material greed?* The American way of life has afforded us the privilege of getting most things we desire. Yet, as our possessions do not always make us feel whole, we live in a perpetual state of liberal guilt.²⁶ We decide to help others in a vain attempt to attain completeness.

This is true of me, and my guilt runs deep. I cannot justify why I was born into a life of such luxury, when so many people suffer, but I was. In an attempt to answer for my skin color and privilege, I fell into a trap. Deep down I believed that helping poor black children would make up for all that my race had historically executed under oppression.

Prior to going to Africa, I did not fully comprehend the political meaning of my whiteness, nor did I understand that it was part of my

²⁶ Liberal guilt implies that people want to make the change, but do not for reasons known only in the mind of the person who feels the guilt.

identity. I had been inadvertently groomed to think and behave in ways that could make my “others” react with the forceful indifference I received from Misiwe. I did know I did not want the responsibility of teaching my own class. Although I wanted to help Misiwe, I could not ascertain how to communicate this to her. We seemed to be too different.

I was American, and she was African. We did not understand each other, regardless of the language barrier. Even though she spoke English fairly well, it was difficult for us to grasp every detail of what we said to each other. We were from different worlds, Misiwe and I. Her world had been filled with her people being oppressed by white South Africans. My world had been filled with white privilege. It did not matter if I wanted the privilege or not, I benefitted from it, and Misiwe knew that. I was certain she was conscious of the fact that everywhere whites were better off than her and her people.

Misiwe could see right through me and my initial intentions. She was aware that I did not want to help her in the way she needed. At first, I refused to think of her in terms other than her being unforgiving of my American ignorance, but she knew I was young and naive.

I make all of these assumptions about Misiwe's character and life, yet I did not really know her at all. I knew she and her bright ten-year-old daughter lived in Khayelitsha, and that Misiwe was unmarried. She never opened up to me, and while I could decipher from her body language how she felt about me, she never explicitly described her life. I could not hide from Misiwe, but she could hide from me.

* * * * *

At the beginning of my second week, I spoke with Pumla's husband, the man who was always dressed in the flowing cotton suits. I was having a terrible time adjusting to Misiwe's personality. He grinned the entire time we spoke.

"Yes, *Sisi*," he said. "I will give you another classroom. Then you will be happy."

Relieved, I followed him into another room, closer to the playground. When he opened the door, I felt myself gag at the smell of urine - old and new. The air was saturated with the pungent odor; it was as if the particles were seeping into my skin. I plastered on my biggest smile and waved to the children.

The man dug his knuckles into my back, bent down and harshly whispered, "Introduce yourself." I could still see his gleaming teeth out of the corner of my eye.

"Molweni abantwana! Igama lam nguCatherine."

"Good Morning, Teacher!" was the response I received. I looked around, from face to face, and could feel the dread starting again. I had already learned my kids' names. I didn't think I could learn all of these names too.

I looked at the teacher, who was sitting at her little table in the corner smiling mindlessly. I walked over to her, and sat down in an empty child's size plastic chair.

"Well?" she asked me. She never even told me her name. To this day, I do not know what to call her.

I dug through my bag to see what I had brought. I pulled out thirty copies of a sheet that had a B outlined on it. I had planned to let my students practice their letters, and as Cynthia had taken A, I was left with B. The teacher took the papers from me and began handing them out. Just like in my other class, crayons were passed out. Every child was silent, save for the occasional inhalation of mucus.

I walked around the tiny room, awkwardly looking over the tiny hunched heads. Some of the kids would turn around, in order to get a better look at my face, while others would simply ignore me. When I got back to the front of the room, I asked the teacher if she could tell me each child's name.

"Ingaba yintoni oyifunayo ngoku?" (What could it be that you want now?²⁷) I decided to ignore her nasty manner. I could not understand what her words were, so I tried again.

"Igama. Abantwana. Igama." Name. Children. Name. I pleaded with her using my tone, and my mouth stumbled over the unfamiliar words. My brow furrowed, and I looked directly at her.

"Ah!" she said. *"Igama! Names!"*

"Ewe!" I said. Yes! This teacher spoke less English than Misiwe.

She dug through buckets of documents and finally pulled out a Ziplock bag full of name tags. I inspected them as she disentangled each one and handed it to the correct child. The detail with which each one was created made me look at my feet in shame. Instead of hand writing each name, as I had done, these had been typed. Instead of using clear

²⁷ Martha R. O'Kennon, *English to Xhosa Translator*, <http://mokennon2.albion.edu/e2x.htm>, (1996).

tape to cover each of my poorly drawn shapes, these had been perfectly laminated. Instead of cheap yarn, these had thick jewelry cord.

My self-pity began to rise even higher as I saw that almost all of the handouts I had wanted to bring for the kids had already been done. Could I even bring anything new to these kids? Would I really have time to make any kind of difference?

Misiwe popped her head in the door and barely looked at me. “Teacher,” she said. “You said you would take pictures of the children. Please come do that now.”

The previous Friday, I had told Misiwe and the kids that we would have a “Picture Day.” I would take their class picture, and eventually create an activity based on the pictures. I picked up my bag and, thankful to be out of the room filled with the overpowering stench of urine and strained energy, followed Misiwe to her classroom.

When I walked in the other room, the kids didn’t know how to respond to my presence. Some were excited, some were confused, some were indifferent. They filed out of the room and lined up on the concrete. Misiwe placed each child where she wanted him or her, forming three

lines. Then she stood in the middle of the back line and told everyone to smile.

I counted to three, and a couple of the kids counted with me. I took two pictures of the class, and then proceeded to take individual photographs.



My class, with Misiwe in the back.

I decided that I wanted to keep my camera out, and take some candid shots of the children as we played. But when I got to the ramshackle jungle gym, I didn't know who to play with.

The kids from my first class, namely Thato, Siyahka, Njabulo, Thembelani, and Azazole, wanted my attention so badly they began to

become violent with the kids from my second class. The ones from my first class looked so hurt and confused. It must have seemed like I didn't want them anymore, that I didn't think they were worth my time. They were too young to understand my conflict with Misiwe. They didn't need to know that I was feeling uncomfortable around her, indeed uncomfortable in my own skin. I didn't feel hatred from Misiwe; I felt apathy. I felt burdened with too much, being in a new country around people I'd never even seen before, trying to communicate with individuals who hardly spoke my language. And here was this woman, who was supposed to help my transition and assuage some of my fears, completely ignoring me. So seeing these children vying for my attention made me feel incredibly sad: could I give them what they needed? What about what I needed?

But I couldn't wallow in self pity for long. Tiny voices were becoming larger by the second. I refused to be "fought over" by a bunch of five-year-olds. I made it very clear that I would play with everyone and that no one would be left out. Camera in hand, I walked up to random children and put the camera in their faces. I'd snap a shot quickly, then

flip the camera around to let them see their picture. They would squeal in delight, completely amazed at what they were seeing.

“That’s you!” I would say, pointing to the picture. Once the initial confusion had subsided, the kids would hand the camera back to me and run off, shrieking.

The teachers came up to me and, through our crude pantomime, asked if I would take their pictures as well. I had no idea whether or not they had ever had their pictures taken, but of course I would take them regardless. They each posed, with one leg bent, as if they were attending their first high school prom.

Seeing Misiwe interact with the other teachers made me feel awkward. She would look over at me, and a faint smile would pass over her lips. But she had treated me with such disdain: how could I stay in her classroom? Her cold demeanor told me that she was also uncomfortable; she knew I had requested to be switched and we both felt insulted.

Before Wonga arrived, I decided to speak with Pumla’s husband one more time.

“What is it now, *Sisi*?” He asked me, his stern gaze lifted from the paper in front of him. This time he was not grinning.

“I...” I trailed off. His huge stature intimidated me. I felt stupid standing in front of him, as if I were a child being punished for doing something I knew I shouldn’t have done. I cleared my throat, and tried again. “I want to be switched back. I want to go back to my old class.”

He looked at me with steel eyes. “Fine.” He waved me out of the room.

As I walked onto the concrete drive, Wonga pulled up. All the kids came running to say goodbye to me and Cynthia. Misiwe was at the back of the crowd. I walked over to her, and Wonga honked the horn. *We have a schedule to follow*, his gaze told me from the driver’s seat.

I looked at her with sadness in my eyes; she reached up and touched my face. We contemplated each other, and relaxed as we apologized and forgave one another with our touch. She then embraced me, and I felt as if I were just another five-year-old, hugging my own mother. We were different from each other, and that was okay. We both had our assumptions of the other, and that, too, was okay. We might not

have been able to understand our different worlds, but Misiwe and I could both learn from each other.

She whispered in my ear, "I will see you tomorrow, Teacher."

Who Will Take Care of the Children?

Pumla, the principal of Little Flowers, hardly ever visited the school. Most days she sent her husband to the creche, in her place, to attend to her affairs. The first time I saw her, I thought she was the parent of a child, instead of the woman supposedly in charge.

We pulled up to the educare and noticed an unmarked car in the carport. *No bother*, I thought to myself; it had become commonplace to see random cars on the lot. One of the groundskeepers was vigorously scrubbing the exterior of the car, and as he rinsed soap from the glimmering black paint, I saw the car was an Audi.

That's an expensive model to be driving through Khayelitsha. My curiosity was peaked.

A woman was walking the grounds with a haughty gait and a glare etched on her face. She had long, expensive looking, braided extensions in her hair, and several of her teeth had been capped in gold. It was clear to me that she had copious amounts of money. In a place where most people have nothing, someone with an abundance of material wealth is easily noticed.

I did not know she was Pumla until I asked Misiwe if she knew this strange woman. Misiwe chuckled under her breath and whispered, “*Ewe*, Teacher. That is the principal.”

“Oh.” I did not know how to respond, but, without missing a beat, Misiwe began to describe to me the conditions under which she worked with Pumla.

Each child, according to Misiwe, who had no reason to lie to me, had to pay 300 Rand a month to attend Little Flowers. At the time, the exchange rate was 7.41R to the American Dollar. Therefore, each family had to pay approximately 41USD to send their children to the creche. Seems fairly inexpensive, right?

Each teacher at the creche was paid a salary of 200R a month, which equals out to approximately 27USD a month. Seems fairly cheap, right? Exactly. These people are working for next to nothing.

Each classroom has minimal supplies. There is plain white printer paper which each teacher has to buy herself. There are two small buckets full of broken crayons. The tables at which the children sit are falling apart, and have been taped in places. There are no chalkboards, with the exception of a child’s size easel.

In the baby rooms, the children sleep on the floor, and their diapers are never changed. If a toddler soils himself, he must sit in his mess all day until he is picked up from school.

The bathroom has toilets that are constantly overflowing. The only toilet big enough for an adult is missing a toilet seat. There is no soap.

In the kitchen, the mamas do not have many ingredients with which to work, but they do the best they can. The utensils do not get thoroughly washed, and are reused everyday.

If a teacher wants to do something with her class, she must pay for the materials or supplies herself. If she wants to make copies in the office, using the school's copier, she has to pay for the ink and the paper she used. Payment includes buying another ink cartridge and ream of paper, regardless of how many copies are made. This rule is strictly enforced, and so the children usually just go without.

"Why is it this way?" I asked Misiwe.

"Because of greed, Teacher." I will never forget the way Misiwe pronounced the word. Her mouth barely open, she whispered the G, rolled the R heavily, dragged out the EE, and definitively enunciated the

D. Her eyes narrowed to slits as she said it, as if it were a word to never be uttered.

There were six teachers at the creche, three mamas who worked in the kitchen, the two groundskeepers, and Pumla's assistant. Twelve employees in total. It is safe to assume that all employees receive the same salary. Those twelve employees collect 2400R, in total, a month. There are approximately five hundred children who attend Little Flowers. The tuition of those five hundred bodies amounts to 15,000R, in total, a month. As it is clear Pumla and her husband are not supplying the teachers with many supplies at all, where is the rest of the money going?

The simple answer is straight into Pumla's pocket. The day I first laid eyes on the woman, she left the same time the Audi left. Misiwe and I watched her pull out from the carport, and go speeding down the street.

"So that car was hers, then." I looked at Misiwe.

"*Jah*,²⁸ Teacher. It is only one of her seven."

"Misiwe, is that why there seems to be a different car here every morning?"

²⁸ Afrikaans. Pronounced, "Yah."

“No, Teacher. Pumla never comes here, and her husband only drives one car.” She took a breath. “See, Teacher, we have a small business here. Yes, we teach the children, and we look after them, but Ishmael and Joshua²⁹ wash cars in the morning. All that money goes back to Pumla. And we are left with nothing again.”

The following day, Misiwe was absent. Joy, another one of the teachers, with a class the same age as mine, came over to help me out, and brought her class along. I was so thankful to have her helping me; I could not have expressed my relief any more blatantly. While I had become accustomed to leading my class, I knew I would not be able to survive the day without someone backing me up.

As soon as Joy’s class had settled in the empty seats of my absent student’s chairs, and we got them situated with work to do, Joy sat down in one of the white chairs and made motions for me to join her. I leaned against a stack, and watched the children chatter and write.

“I am not from here,” she said to me, her voice full of sadness. “I am from Port Elizabeth. Do you know where that is?”

²⁹ Joshua was another groundskeeper. However, he was not at the creche nearly as often as Ishmael.

“Yes, it is in the Eastern Cape,” I responded, not taking my eyes off the children.

“*Jah*. It is far.” She sighed deeply, and then began her story.

Joy was a single mother, who had left her only daughter in Port Elizabeth, while she came to Khayelitsha to work. Her daughter was to stay with Joy’s mother while she was away. Joy only gets to see her daughter once a year, during her December holiday.

Joy lives in a shack, roughly one hundred square feet, with six other people. She does this because she only has to spend 50R a month to sleep on the floor. She spends as little as she can on food, and sends the rest of her money to her daughter. She has very little money, and still manages to keep her chin up.

50 Rand? I thought to myself. *How could anyone live on 50R?* I remembered the weekend: I had spent 750R to go on a wine tour and 100R to pet a cheetah. 50 Rand? One could spend that at Nando’s, the chicken place in Rondebosch, on one meal. The guilt started to set in. I thought of the money in my bag. I wanted to give it to her, to help her out. I took a breath to stop myself from moving towards my wallet.

"I long to go back to school," she said, interrupting my thoughts of money, "to get a nursing degree." She spoke quietly, as if the walls were writing notes to report back to Pumla. If she were to have a job as a nurse, she tells me, she would be able to send more money to her daughter, and they both would be able to live more comfortably.

"Comfortably?" I asked her.

"*Jah*, Teacher."

"I think you mean, humanely."

"Is there a difference?"

She took a deep breath and continued. Pumla wouldn't even let Joy take a day off because she knew Joy would inquire about going back to school. Pumla would lose Joy.

"Would anyone take your place here?" I asked.

"Teacher, I don't know." She paused. "I think someone would, someone who really needed money. But you never know."

Due to fear of losing employees, no one is allowed to take any time off. Pumla believes that her teachers will use days off as a time to go into the city and look for better work. Her suspicions are correct; Joy does not want to stay at Little Flowers. If given the chance, she will pay the

expensive 2R bus fare into Cape Town. She will visit Cape Peninsula University of Technology, and obtain information about a nursing degree.

But Joy cannot do this, because she is not allowed to take any personal time from work. She is also not allowed to take sick days, even if she is legitimately sick. She must come in to work and be around children all day.

“And Misiwe? Will she be in trouble?”

“We will not tell Pumla she is not here. No one will. Hopefully she will be okay.”

She paused and looked at the children working quietly.

“Hold on, Teacher, I will be right back.” Joy hurried out of the room, looking nervous. She came back a minute later, clutching a tattered newspaper.

“I picked this up in the street,” she said, thrusting the greasy paper into my hands. I looked down and saw the page had been opened to a story about creche teachers being severely mistreated and underpaid.

“Can I have this?” I asked her.

“No, Teacher. But I will make you a copy.”

While I was in South Africa, most of the teachers were on strike. They wanted more pay and adequate resources. Basically, they wanted to be treated better. Certainly there is nothing wrong with that. It is their job to educate the country's youth.

I feared the strikes would reach the creches: what would I do without my teacher? I couldn't teach class alone: I needed Misiwe there with me. My anxiety was unfounded, because the preschool teachers didn't strike.

When I asked Misiwe why they weren't striking with everyone else, she asked me, "Teacher, who will look after the children?"

While the teachers of primary schools were walking out, the teachers in the creches, scattered every few blocks, had no choice but to stay. Without the daycare facilities, children would run the streets. Their parents would be at work, and older siblings would not be in school. Everywhere would get taken over by children. So, Misiwe and her colleagues stay in for the greater good.

"Plus," Misiwe added, "Pumla takes away 50 Rand for every day we are not here."

Spiritual Bonds and Brokenness

The groundskeeper at the preschool, Ishmael, would walk around and smoke cigarettes. I never saw him doing anything to help out at the school. Ishmael was very thin, and a few inches taller than me. He wore the same clothing every day. His ratty blue zip-up sweatshirt covered a faded black teeshirt and had so many holes, of different sizes. It was hard to tell if the holes were from moths, cigarette burns, too much usage, or some combination of the three. His jeans were so worn and dirty that the knees were permanently stained brown. The green baseball cap he wore was glued to his head and never came off.

It was no surprise to me that Ishmael was poor. Nor was it a surprise that Ishmael also had HIV. He did not ever tell me his status, because it was none of my business. During orientation, we had learned telling signs of someone who had HIV. 'You will see the spots on their skin,' they had told us. 'They will be darker than normal skin color. They might also have sores on or around their lips.' I could see spots on the little bits of Ishmael's skin that showed. They crept up his neck and down his wrists. The lesions on his hands were impossible to ignore. The ulcers around his lips were telling. His hollowed out cheeks, saggy facial

flesh, and the gaunt look in his eyes were dead giveaways. His clothes hung off of him as if he were a child wearing his father's attire.

The first time he spoke to me, I was blowing bubbles with the kids outside. They would scream, "*Vuvutela*, Teacher! *Vuvutela*!" It didn't take me long to learn they were asking to blow the bubbles. I would put the slimy stick full of bubbles yet to be made in front of their faces and they would blow while giggling violently. Ishmael sauntered up to me and asked me my name.

"Catherine," I said.

"American?"

I said yes.

"Are you married?"

"No," I replied flatly.

"I am not married either," he said. He paused, raised his eyebrows and smiled. "I am looking for a young white bride." His matter-of-factness caught me off guard. I wasn't sure how to respond, so I simply nodded. "You are so good with the kids. You will make a great mother." I stuffed the bubbles into my pocket and picked up Thembelani. As I walked away, I felt his eyes on my back.

Once, several kids and I were outside playing when one of them fell. The little boy began to cry as he had scraped a little skin off his hands. Ishmael grabbed the little boy from the ground by his armpits and screamed, "African Men Don't Cry!"

I was horrified. Before I could stop myself, I grabbed the boy from Ishmael as he was raising his hand to strike the tiny face. I looked at him and simply said, "He's four."

I turned around and left Ishmael standing there alone. I knew I had crossed a cultural line. Volunteers were only present in the schools as a helping hand. We were not supposed to interfere with any sort of disciplinary action: we were only there to support the teacher.

By taking the child away from Ishmael as he was trying to punish the little boy, I had completely breeched the trust and respect I was supposed to have for the cultural practices of South Africa. I had emasculated him in front of twenty children. I expected at least a stern talking to from the principal's husband or my teacher, yet nothing happened. Ishmael only tried harder to woo me.

My second Friday, as I was stacking the plastic chairs according to color (blue, red, green, and yellow, always in that order, every single time),

Ishmael appeared in the open classroom door. He leaned against the door frame and watched me work. Subconsciously, my body tensed. I picked up the broom and began to sweep the carpet floor. Although my hair covered my face, I worried that he could see my flushed cheeks.

“We have church on Sundays here,” Ishmael informed me. I nodded: the stacks of white plastic chairs had finally been explained to me. “I would like you to come to church with me this Sunday.” I focused on sweeping the sand and chip crumbs into a pile. “We need to work on our spiritual bond if we are to be married.”

I stopped sweeping and looked at him. “I’m sorry, Ishmael.” I could feel my voice shaking despite my attempts to remain calm. “I’m not allowed to be in the township alone. I appreciate your concern though.” He stared at me.

This was true. The staff of the program didn’t even like us to walk into Rondebosch alone and we lived three blocks away in Rosebank. Even if I had wanted to go, there was no way I could persuade Wonga to take me to Khayalitsha on a Sunday to go to church with a township man. Wonga would lose his job. Regardless, I did not want to be anywhere with this man.

It was absurd for him to think we would be married. For a fleeting moment, I thought he wanted to ruin me. I thought that he wanted to take away my whiteness, my privilege, everything that he thought made me. I felt like Lucy, a character in J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace.³⁰ After being violated sexually, Lucy, a white South African, is forced to reckon with her skin color and the differences between black and white in South Africa. It seemed he wanted to make me forget where I had come from and remain in Africa with him. I would have to acclimate to his life, the life of the township, and say goodbye to all of my dreams and goals.

Would I live in the township with him, or would he expect to come back to America with me? Maybe he thought I would take him away from his life in South Africa, and bring him into my world. I would show him what it meant to be an American, with all the privilege, arrogance, and so-called beauty. The places my mind went with hypothetical questions were almost humorous.

I tried to show him that I was being genuine in the reasons I had given him, so I forced a smile. I thought I hid my fear fairly well.

"You would not be alone. I would be with you."

³⁰ J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

He sure is persistent, I thought. But before I had time to respond, Lukho ran into the classroom, followed closely by Njabulo and Azazole.

“Teacher!” Lukho screamed, jumping onto my back. Njabulo squealed with delight as he and Azazole tried pulling Lukho from my back.

“Alright, alright, I’m coming!” I looked up, and saw the doorway empty. Ishmael had disappeared. “Njabulo, get the dustbin.” I made sweeping motions with my hands, while Lukho still clung around my neck.

No matter what I said or did, Ishmael never really left me alone. Every time I would see him he would leer at me. If I caught him looking at me, he would smile, raise his eyebrows and blow a kiss to me before taking a drag on his cigarette. I told Misiwe how uncomfortable he made me and she nodded knowingly, as if that too was just a part of South African life.

I watched as Misiwe had words with him; I couldn’t tell if she was really irate or if the clicks made her sound more angry. Nevertheless, her body language did not suggest she condoned his continual harassment of me. Ishmael walked past the tire swing set, where I had been pushing

Thato, and sang quietly, “You’re a sexy lady,” dragging out the E sound in lady. Chills ran down my spine.

* * * * *

Even though South Africa is the most developed and Westernized country in Africa, many of the Western ideals I had grown up with were not present in township life. I was used to men and women being mostly equal. All women had the option to say “No” to something they did not want to do. To be so victimized by Ishmael was degrading.

I asked Misiwe why Ishmael behaved the way he did. She did not know exactly how to answer my question, but she racked her brain to give me a sufficient response. She recalled the story of the cattle killing to explain his misogyny.

During the 1850s, a young Xhosa girl named Nongqawuse had a dream that she believed came from her ancestors. She shared her prophecy with her people: the sun would rise and set in the East, the dead would rise again and kill all the white oppressors.

“The whites would be driven into the sea. Nongqawuse told everyone to slaughter cattle, burn crops, and throw out all their stored

food. A new world was coming, and everyone had to be prepared,” Misiwe explained.

Even though following her commands went against so many of the Xhosa beliefs, they were so desperate for change from white rule that they would trust anything. However, the events of vision did not transpire, even though the Xhosa killed their cattle and crops. Many starved to death. Everyone blamed the young girl.³¹

This story is still told in the Xhosa oral histories. The blame is still placed on the young prophetess. To this day, anger towards women is prevalent. While Nongqawuse is not the first, nor only, instance of the antagonistic attitudes, it is probably the most popular. And that was what Ishmael knew.

What I knew was that Ishmael scared me, in a very deep part of my being. As a person, he was not frightening; he was more pathetic than anything. It was what he represented for me: an abuser. It was possible that Ishmael treated all the young, female volunteers at Little Flowers with such perverted disrespect, but I never saw it happen.

³¹ Helen Bradford, “Not a Nongqawuse story: An anti-heroine in historical perspective,” in *Basus’imibokodo, bawel’imilabo/They remove boulders and cross rivers: Women in South African history*, ed. Nomboniso Gasa, (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007), 43-90.

I knew that by putting up with it, I was allowing myself to be victimized again. It's a cycle I find myself in: digging up someone who is broken and trying to piece them back together, without realizing until later that I have shattered myself in the process. Perhaps I was being tested. Had I finally learned my lesson, that I do not need to save everyone? Was it really all right for me to not fix an issue?

My mother always told me, "No matter how terrible you think your life is, there is always someone worse off than you." And while I always knew that to be true, it didn't fully make an impact on me until I got to South Africa. I like to play the victim: I have the worst problems, and no one can help me. To put it simply, that is not true. Sure, my family is not the most affluent, but our standard of living is such that, to many, we live a life of complete indulgence. Electronics, multiple cars at various times, clean clothes. Many could envy the life I had growing up. But to me, life was hell.

When my father left us, I was four years old. For a long time, it felt like he wanted nothing to do with me or my brothers. My father's desertion of his wife and children affected each of us differently. My mother had no choice but to support her children any way she could. My

eldest brother probably took the abandonment the hardest of the boys: Grady was eleven and had spent the most time with our father. But I had convinced myself, from the tender age of four, that my father's absence was my fault. If I had not been born, my parents would still be together. Ever since, I have made it my goal in life to fix everyone's problems so they will like me, and never leave.

I've been desperately searching for the reason my father left. My mother will tell you it's because he was too weak of a man to take care of his children. My father, on the other hand, will blame it all on my mother: she was too strong, and knew too much of what she wanted for his children, and the intense pressure was just too much for him to manage. Whichever way you want to look at it, both side says the same thing; my father could not accept the responsibility of four children.

What he did not know was how his actions would affect our lives. My brothers are fearful that they will never be the men that women want them to be. Searching for a father figure in the men I date has left me tangled in a mess of failed, abusive relationships. I want to fix everyone; I want to make them whole again. Instinctively, I take their suffering and make it my own suffering. That way, I can focus on everyone else's

problems, and ignore my own. I can hear my mother's voice in my head, "You compartmentalize way too much." I put my problems on the back burner until I'm finished helping you with yours. But when I finish with yours, I'll just find something else to occupy my brain, instead of overcoming my own obstacles. Needless to say, it's not a very healthy way to manage one's life.

I believed my being born caused my father to leave, and I needed to know what I could do to bring him back. His half of the family did not want us: instead of our grandparents being excited to see us the one time they came to visit, they were thrilled to meet the new girlfriend. I was six. They stopped calling altogether before I was ten. Was something wrong with me? How could they not want me? From then, I have tried to do everything in my power to make people want me. I will fix your problems if you promise to stay.

A confidant once told me that I have a vulnerable side that makes me desirable as a woman. It is the need to take care of people, and that vulnerability is what gets me into trouble. It is easy for people to take advantage of me, psychologically. I can't blame them. They see a weakness and they exploit it, and then reap the benefits of that

exploitation. Yet my jaded heart refuses to allow itself to be completely lost in the cynicism that wants to envelop it. I always have to find the good parts of someone, and that endeavor clouds my eyes to potential dangers.

I am being vague; this is an intentional tactic to save everyone from my traumatic story. This is how I operate. I work so hard to create a reality that exists only in my mind, because I believe it is better for everyone involved. The peril and fear I felt about Ishmael is best characterized in the elements of my past.

Right after I started college, I met a man quite a few years older than me. He was damaged: years of childhood abuse followed by a stint in the military gave way to severe post-traumatic stress disorder. I felt sorry for him, and I believed it was my duty to pull him back from the nightmarish abyss into which he was about to fall. I needed to be his savior. If I saved him, my inner turmoil would be quieted, and I would be able to be saved.

I sacrificed every part of my being - mind, body, soul, and morals - for this man. In return, I became his personal punching bag. His illness was so severe that he inflicted bodily harm upon me. I tried to hide the

physical abuse because if no one knew about it, then it wasn't real. If no one knew about it, I could continue taking care of him. I had fooled myself into believing he could, and would, change.

The relationship ended shortly before I arrived in South Africa, and I was slowly healing. I believed South Africa would give me a fresh start, a chance to rediscover myself. And there I was, faced with another potential predator. I wanted nothing to do with Ishmael; I was scared of how my mind would warp the situation to make it okay for me to casually entertain his fancies, if only through slight conversation. Inside, a voice was telling me, quietly, "It's okay to ignore him. He doesn't need you. You don't need to save him."

Another volunteer told me later that after I had left, Ishmael kept talking about me. She had not she known he had become entranced with me. "He's crazy," she wrote to me. "He kept on and on about how you were his soul mate, and how he was going to go to America, find you, and make you his bride."

Five Years Old, and Sentenced to Die

All the children were curious to know about me. Where did I come from? Did I have a family? What did they look like? I could hardly tell them to sit down, let alone tell them about my mother and three brothers. Misiwe told me, "Teacher, they want to know about your family. They want to know who you are."

I was stumped. I hardly knew who I was, how was I going to communicate who I thought I was to these children? I was secretly worried about describing where I came from because I have benefitted from the American privileges and ideals. I had received a good education, and even though there were material objects I had wanted for in my life, my mother did her best to provide for me and my three brothers. My entire life, I had ballet classes, piano lessons, choir rehearsals. I had starred in plays in high school, and had tried my hand at drawing (as it turns out, I can't draw a straight line to save my life). My brothers and I had all been educated at very good schools. There were nights when we had cans of tuna fish or scrambled eggs for dinner, but we never skipped a meal and ate together as often as possible. We received haircuts in a timely manner, wore clothes without holes, and bathed every day. We

almost always had running water, electricity, and maybe a few years passed during which we did not have a washing machine and dryer. My mother made it so that her children, all four of us, had every opportunity we could. She allowed us to grow up and become the people we wanted to become. We are a world traveller, a ballet dancer, an architect. And I have always had a desire to save.

There was no way, in my mind, that I could tell these kids who I was, or who I wanted to be, without making myself feel awkward. These were kids who had few clothes to wear, bathed once a week, and used communal port-a-potties. No matter how I framed it, I looked like a spoiled brat who had been given everything she had ever wanted. Even if it was not precisely the case, I feared that was how it would appear to eyes that had never seen American living. I decided the best way I could describe myself and my family was to not use language, but to use pictures, and to be as basic as possible. Pictures left things to the imagination: words confused everything more.

I printed photos of my mother and three brothers from the internet and pasted them onto a poster board. I decorated the edges with silver glitter glue, and wrote each brothers name and age on it. I wrote simple

details on it: We live in Dallas, Texas, United States of America. There are five of us. I am the youngest, and I am the only girl. This is my *bhuti*, Grady. The oldest boy. This is my *bhuti*, Nolan. The middle boy. This is my *bhuti*, Kyle. The youngest boy. This is my Mama. This is me. My Family. *Abantu-basekhaya*.

Did that really explain who I was? No. I could not tell these children of my hardships, of what I had overcome, just so I could be in this classroom. Sure, my travails were nothing compared to the misery of living in a township, but to me, my problems had once seemed insurmountable. I, too, had suffered abuses of the body and mind, but I had had the fortune to escape my situation.

My eyebrows still furrow involuntarily every time I think of my past.

When I brought my poster in, Misiwe looked at it, then at my face, and began shrieking, "Oh Teacher! Teacher! So beautiful, Teacher!" I smiled, but I could feel my face beginning to burn with slight embarrassment.

As I stood in front of the classroom, my mind flashed to where I had been a year prior: in a relationship that left my body black and blue.

Instantly, self-deprecating thoughts entered my head. *How could I let myself be taken for such a ride? If I had stayed, where would I be now? Would I be dead? Yes, but probably not physically: psychically broken. But I didn't stay. I'm here. So, what's next then, for me?*

"What's next, Teacher?"

"Well," my voice trailed off; I was trying to clear my head of my useless thoughts. I saw the children staring at me expectantly, and remembered where I was. "I want to see what your families look like."

I passed out pieces of paper to each child, and each table received a handful of broken crayons. "Draw! I want to see what your families look like!" I was met with silence. I looked at Misiwe, and whispered, "Tell them to draw their families, please."

Misiwe roared with laughter, her chest rising and falling with each peal. I don't know if she was laughing because I couldn't say it to the kids in isiXhosa, or because maybe I looked like a fool to her. Maybe she could see my innocence, but I knew that I was red with humiliation.

She caught her breath and told the children to draw their families. Some drew stick figures, others drew round people, while a few simply drew faint lines across the page.

Because there were no letters involved, Misiwe and I were able to allow each child to draw as he or she wanted. We did not have to help children form words or numbers. But I did have to place the crayon in Unathi's hand properly, and make Phiwe spit out his slimy crayon into my hand.

Misiwe began telling me about the lives the children lead. I was astonished to learn that each child had two, maybe three, outfits: school uniforms and play clothes. Their uniforms consisted of light blue button down shirts that were perpetually untucked, grey slacks, and navy blue pull over sweaters. Some children had little navy windbreakers with their names embroidered on the shoulder. All wore black shoes, and the same pair of socks. School rules permitted children to wear play clothes on Fridays.

"The only place we were able to use indoor plumbing is here, Teacher," Misiwe whispered to me as we walked around. "If we are not here we have to use the public outhouses. The children rarely get baths."

These facts saddened me, but I never vocalized my thoughts. Misiwe could see the despair in my face.

"Such is life, Teacher," she said, sharing in my despondency.

The high pitched sound of children's chatter helped me keep focus and not get too involved with my thoughts. The noise followed me as I went around and asked the kids to tell me who the people were in their pictures. It was going well, and I was learning about their families: some kids had grandparents living with them, some kids didn't. Some kids were the oldest, some were the youngest. They were just like us. They were just like me.

And then I got to Unathi, who looked up at me with the bright grin that took up half of his face. "Teacher!" He squeaked up at me. I rubbed the top of his head as I bent down to look at his picture. Yellow scribbles and streaks covered his paper.

"Who's this?" I asked him. He looked at me smiling. "Unathi? Who's this?" Still, I received no answer. "Unathi." I tapped my fingers on the paper. "Mama?" He looked at me, and shook his head, all the while grinning. I silently wished I had not given Unathi this assignment - I knew he had trouble with writing, of course he'd have trouble drawing. I called Misiwe over to help me figure out what to do.

"Oh, Teacher..." she trailed off. She tugged me away from Unathi by my wrist and looked up at me. "Unathi has no family. He lives across

the street.” I looked at him, sitting in his seat smiling at everyone. Unathi positively beamed.

“Across the street? At Fikelela?” I asked her. Fikelela is run by the Anglican church in Cape Town, and temporarily houses children orphaned by AIDS until they are placed in a suitable home. Fikelela also attempts to educate the general population about HIV and AIDS. All of the transitory residents live with HIV and some have AIDS.³²

Misiwe nodded slowly. I was floored. I didn’t know any of my children were HIV positive, but there sat Unathi, sucking on a crayon, HIV positive. Five years old and sentenced to death.



Unathi

³² Fikelela home page: www.fikelela.org.za/about.asp.

I was completely silent. I looked down at my shoes, while trying to hold back my tears. Misiwe, who barely came up to my shoulder, took my hand and quietly said, “Teacher.” I looked into her glinting brown eyes, and she looked up at me.

“Teacher,” she repeated, as she gently squeezed my hand. “This is life. We do not control life.” She took my hand. “He is receiving treatment. He takes his ARVs every day.” I knew the advances in antiretroviral medication had made a huge affect on life expectancy, but the pills were so expensive. Unathi had no means of paying for the medication, and Fikelela only had so much money. They would not, and could not, support him for much longer.

Unathi has no family. Misiwe’s words rang in my head. Even though I knew about South Africa’s HIV and AIDS rates, knowing one of my kids had it was shocking. Approximately one in four South Africans is HIV positive, or has full blown AIDS. But, one of my kids? Someone I had grown affectionate toward? Someone so young?

For all of my strength and supposed detachment, which was only denial, I was forced to surrender to my feelings when I was told Unathi, the left-handed boy with the toothy smile, was HIV positive.

The first time I had any experience with HIV / AIDS, I had only been five years old, myself. My mother had a colleague named Stan who was tall and thin, with brown eyes, and a smile that twinkled. The clearest memory I have of Stan was when I was about four, and my brother Kyle had been six. Stan took us to F.A.O. Schwartz, the ritzy toy store in our local mall.

“One toy, each,” he told us. A glint in his eye said that my mother didn’t know about the presents. Yet, I did not know about that until we returned home, I with my brand new, plastic, purple My Little Pony, and Kyle with his Crash Test Dummies, and my mother looked at Stan with a slightly disapproving smile.

“You shouldn’t have,” she said.

“I had fun. You know I love hanging out with your kids,” was his reply, assuaging my mother’s minimal objections.

I didn’t know Stan was sick. All I knew was that, about a year later, my mother instructed me, through a shaky voice, to put on my Sunday best.

“Why?” I whined back to her.

“We have to go to Stan’s funeral. He died,” she replied curtly, though her eyes were watering.

“Funeral” and “died” were not words that registered in my mind. “I don’t care!” I screamed back at her. I ran out the front door and across the street to my safe haven at my friend’s house. My closest friend and only helper with all plans - fun or mischievous - at five years old, I trusted her with my life. I stood at her bedroom window and peered through the pink blinds as my mother, dressed in black, walked out the door, alone. She quietly got into the Volvo station wagon, the family car, and backed out of the driveway. Immediately, I thought, *I should have gone with her. She looks so sad.*

It did not make an impression on me that I would never see Stan again.

I asked my mother several times when Stan would come around again, and she just shook her head. How do you explain death to a five-year-old? When I was a few years older, my mother tried to explain death in the best way she knew how. At the time, her job was to counsel grieving families who were losing loved ones to a multitude of diseases, yet explaining death to her youngest child proved to be quite the task.

“Stan is with God now,” she carefully explained. “He was very sick, exactly like the patients I see every day, and it was his time to go. His body could not fight off the disease any longer. But now, he doesn’t feel any pain. He’s very peaceful, and his soul is happy. He’s in Heaven.”

Pain? Heaven? Disease? Soul? I began to cry at the seriousness of her tone, and the terrifying sounding words she was introducing to me.

“Don’t cry, sweetheart,” she said, enveloping me in her embrace. “You won’t die for a very, very long time. You have your whole life to live.”

It was a few years later that I was told that Stan was gay, and had contracted HIV from his partner. Stan developed AIDS, and, because the disease was nowhere close to being understood in the late 1980s and early 1990s, had become very sick very quickly.

Later, I learned that Zizo, one of the little girls in my class, was also HIV positive. Zizo was not an orphan, but she also lived at Fikelela. Zizo’s mother “worked nights” as Misiwe told me. Zizo had no brothers or sisters, no aunts, uncles, or grandparents to look after her, so she was

sent to the orphanage to be watched. Essentially, she was an orphan; Zizo never saw her mother, and was constantly craving affection.

The day I learned of Unathi's illness, Zizo was running a fever of what felt like 102. She was coughing, sluggish, and very irritable. I didn't have very much experience dealing with sick kids, but I put on my best face and did what I remembered my mother doing when I was little. I held her all through outside time, even though there were other children begging me for attention. I could not play and soothe at the same time, but whenever I tried to put Zizo down, she would begin to cry. I looked at her, looked at the other kids and shrugged my shoulders. I sat on the edge of the sand pit, cradling Zizo in my arms, and handing digging tools to the others.

As Litha and Axolisiwe ran their tiny fingers through my hair, I held Zizo on my lap. She rested her head on my chest, and sucked on the first two fingers of her left hand. Her occasional whimpers were accompanied by her change of positions. I quietly hummed a little tune in her ear, a lullaby I vaguely remembered. My soft murmuring was filled with love and sadness. For over an hour, I rocked her as she dozed in and out of sleep. When Wonga arrived, Zizo sobbed as I put her down.

After that, Zizo was constantly at my side, begging for my attention. She would pull on my clothes, and sometimes even gently hit me so that I would notice her. But I couldn't just play with her - there were thirty other children (not counting kids in other classes) who wanted piggy back rides, or for me to blow bubbles with them, or just to chase them around. Yet Zizo had latched onto me and her needs quickly became overwhelming. I felt incredibly guilty not giving her my full attention. I knew she rarely saw her mother, if at all. Zizo was sick, and probably didn't get the affection she needed at Fikelela.

Neither did Unathi.

Lathitha, who was also sick, didn't seem to get the attention he needed either. I never knew if Lathitha had HIV or not; regardless he was ill. One morning after prayers, as we were filing back into the classroom, I noticed he had something in his left ear. I asked Misiwe about it, and she said it was nothing. An hour and a half later, there was green pus oozing down the side of Lathitha's head. I felt queasy. It looked as if his brain was rotting and was falling out of his ear.

"Shouldn't he see a doctor?" I asked Misiwe.

“What for, Teacher?” She gave me a puzzled look. I motioned to my ear. She then turned her attention to the little boy. “Lathitha!” She called. He stood in front of her as she handed him a roll of toilet paper and brusquely told him to go to the bathroom and clean out his ear. He did as he was told, and once back in his seat, promptly put his fingers in his mouth. Bathroom hygiene was taught at the creche, but it was beyond my knowledge whether he followed the rules or not.

Throughout the course of the day, I had to tell him repeatedly to clean his ear. Each time, he looked at me and I could see in his eyes he wanted me to clean it for him. He wanted me to help him. I had wiped snot from under noses and slobber from chins, but I could not bring myself to touch the infectious goo leaking from his ear. Every time he got close to me I involuntarily shuddered. I couldn’t ignore him - I was an adult, and I simply couldn’t run away from him, the way my legs wanted me to. I could feel the disgust in the pit of my stomach and the small of my back. It made me feel nauseous: I was afraid it would get on me. I was afraid of his disease. I couldn’t help thinking, *What if I catch it?*

One of the only places Lathitha could have gotten treatment was Sarah Fox Convalescent Hospital, located in Silvertown, Cape Town. It serves children who have illnesses that span from malnutrition to HIV / AIDS, accidents and burns.³³ While Khayelitsha has many HIV / AIDS clinics, and many general clinics which care for children, Sarah Fox is the only convalescent children's hospital in the Western Cape. The issue is getting there, and having the money to pay for the services. Like in all countries, health care in South Africa is expensive - at least more expensive than what the average African living in a township can afford. Because of this, sick children like Lathitha do not get the care they need. Their diseases and conditions go untreated, which increases the risk of spreading infections. Sarah Fox also does not have the space to accommodate all the children who are ill - they only have sixty beds, which are always full. The need for beds is constantly on the rise, as many children who are housed at Sarah Fox are simply abandoned. Parents who feel they are unfit to take care of their children will simply dump them at the hospital.

³³Information on Sarah Fox Convalescent Hospital is available here: <http://plak.co.za/moreinfo.php?id=16800>.

So Lathitha, who has an ear infection so terrible you can see literally the pus oozing down his face, comes into contact with Unathi, who's immune system is already depleted by HIV. Unathi is at a higher risk of acquiring an illness of any kind, and he is frequently under the weather. My last week in Khayelitsha, Unathi had been taken to the hospital to get treatment for an ear infection.

Out of the approximately fifty-million South African citizens, an estimated 5.4 million people over the age of two (10.8% of the total population) are living with HIV / AIDS. Each year, it is estimated that 400,000 people die from AIDS. Another 524,000 people are in need of treatment, but are not receiving it, most likely due to lack of monetary resources.³⁴ The numbers are approximation for several reasons. First, it's impossible to know exact numbers because births and deaths are daily occurrences. It would be impossible to keep up with how many people were adding to, and taking away from, the statistic.

Second, it is physically impossible to interview every single person in the country to see if they have HIV, every single year, just to see if the

³⁴ TAC (Treatment Action Campaign) is a Khayelitsha-based operation, geared towards educating the populous about HIV / AIDS.

statistic has changed. Samples are taken, and those numbers are used to form the numbers for the rest of the country.

Finally, a deafening silence has always surrounded HIV / AIDS in South Africa. In traditional African culture, being sick is seen as a curse that has been laid upon someone for a misdeed. If you have upset your ancestors, they will seek revenge by making you sick and taking away possessions of yours, killing your cattle and setting your house on fire. Common belief makes people visit a witch doctor to find a solution for their problems. This thinking has made many Africans (e.g. isiXhosa and isiZulu), especially in the rural areas, believe that HIV / AIDS can be cured with homeopathic medicines received from a witch doctor. Those remedies obviously do not work, and the person will continue to get more sick.

People avoid getting tested in their own neighborhoods, and sometimes townships or cities, because they do not want their neighbors to see them going into the HIV clinic. “[T]here is counseling before the test, and counseling after the test. The counseling before the test, it’s the same for everybody: a few minutes. But the counseling after the test, for

some it lasts two minutes, for others, it is a long, long time.”³⁵ If one receives the longer counseling, the entire neighborhood will know that person’s HIV status.

One evening, an HIV positive man, Ronnie, came to speak at the house. “Having a positive HIV status essentially makes one a social outcast in South Africa,” he explained, as he loosened the scarf wrapped tightly around his thin neck. “People see you differently. You are no longer who you used to be. Your friends might stop coming to see you.” He paused and removed his jacket. “My sons are ashamed I am homosexual and HIV positive. I am not ashamed. People don’t understand HIV / AIDS. They do not know how it is contracted. They do not know what HIV means.”

Ronnie expounded further: people without HIV do not want services from those with HIV. If you own a store, they will stop shopping there. People lose their livelihoods, and they become sicker because they have no means of caring for themselves. Ronnie was lucky: an American family heard his story, and began paying for his ARVs and food every month.

³⁵ Jonny Steinberg, *Sizwe’s Test* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 31.

People see HIV / AIDS as a curse, and many who believe that by associating with you, they too will anger their ancestors and soon become jinxed. In the rural areas especially, people don't understand how one contracts HIV. Many believe the virus "was put in one's body by witches and their demons, and antiretrovirals [are] useless in the face of witchcraft."³⁶ This lack of understanding effects how people interact with others known to be HIV positive.

The ignorance surrounding the disease is not from insufficient information; it comes from people not willing to learn about the disease. In Khayalitsha, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC)³⁷ works tirelessly in the townships and greater Cape Town to educate people of the risks of HIV, how to prevent contracting HIV, and what to do if you have HIV. The people who work for TAC are not all HIV positive, but none of them are ashamed. Those with HIV wear black shirts with white letters spelling out HIV POSITIVE. Those without HIV wear similar shirts that spell out HIV SUPPORT. TAC can be extremely influential in the communities, but

³⁶ Steinberg, 185.

³⁷ For more information on Treatment Action Campaign, visit: www.tac.org.za.

there will always be people who do not want to accept help from any organization.

Becoming educated and talking about HIV / AIDS makes it real. Denial seems to be human nature, and refusing to talk about an issue lets us humans fool ourselves into believing that it is not a problem. We've all done it. I did it when I was five and Stan died (although, I do grant myself some leniency because I didn't know what death was at the time), and since that age, I have used denial to make myself think things were different. We all do this, to some extent. Denial makes life easier to deal with.

But denial about diseases and treatments creates more problems. People need to talk about the disease and understand it, so they can get proper treatment and stop spreading it. Once everyone gets educated, people - adults and children alike - can stop dying. If that happens, the South African family can begin to heal, and children will no longer be orphaned at the same rates at which they are now.

Currently, approximately two million South African children are orphaned by HIV / AIDS.³⁸ The vicious cycle surrounding orphaning

³⁸ Treatment Action Campaign, Key Statistics, last updated 2008.
<http://tac.org.za/community/keystatistics>.

children seems to be interminable. Because many South African men, particularly from the rural areas, still work in the mines, it is not uncommon that they would have a city girlfriend, and a wife and children back home. Sometimes the man will contract HIV while in this extra-marital relationship; when that man comes home for his holiday visitation and has sexual intercourse with his wife, he gives her the disease. The following year, when the man comes home, he sees his wife ill, and possibly believes that the only way she could have gotten sick is because she was having an affair. The man then leaves his sick wife and children forever, and eventually the woman succumbs to the disease.

One in four women in South Africa is infected with HIV. Due to differences in biological makeup and genitalia, women develop symptoms of AIDS before men do.³⁹ It is not simply body differences, it is also hormonal differences. Women who take oral contraceptives are also at a higher risk of contracting HIV because of the increased levels of progesterone. However, it's hard to know exactly why there is such a drastic difference between men and women, because it would be

³⁹ Female genitalia is more susceptible to accepting the virus because of the mucus barriers and folds. In an effort to decrease the chances of spreading HIV, many men have returned to circumcision. Keeping genitalia clean has made a huge impact on reducing HIV circulation.

incredible unethical to intentionally infect people with HIV to find out.

Testing can be done on monkeys, but those tests can only lead so far.⁴⁰

It would be a gross generalization to say that these are the circumstances which lead to every positive HIV test. However, it seems to happen more frequently than I, or anyone, would like to imagine. Whatever way it happens, many children are left with no parents to support them. These children can be taken in by grandparents, but sometimes those grandparents are not young enough to take on the difficult task of caring for small children. If the child has older siblings, they might look after each other, but taking care of younger siblings is a huge burden. Many children live on the streets. Street children live in little compounds with other street children. They scavenge for food, and steal. Sometimes, they are recruited to become *tsotsis* - gang members - and learn to lead a life of crime. Sometimes they become sex workers so they are able to eat.

Any of my children turning into orphaned street children was a thought that constantly crossed my mind. I still fear some of them will

⁴⁰ Thomas C. Quinn and Julie Overbought, "HIV / AIDS in Women: An Expanding Epidemic," *Science* vol. 308, no. 5728, *Women's Health* (Jun. 10, 2005): 1582-1583.

turn into the children in Duiker's Thirteen Cents.⁴¹ But thanks to community run organizations like TAC and church sponsored orphanages like Fikelela, South Africans, young and old, are given a fighting chance. These groups send the message *You are not alone: we can help you*. All these kids need is a chance, so they can change their lives. Then they might not be sentenced to death.

⁴¹ K. Sello Duiker, *Thirteen Cents* (Cape Town: Ink Inc., 2000).

Air Jaws and My Danger on Land

I love sharks.

But in all honestly, I hadn't had much of an affinity for sharks until I got to South Africa. Sure, they're cool, but my only real exposure to them had been on the local news back home. As tragic as it was, every summer shark attacks were always a headline on the news; weather at 9. When I was younger, I'd spend all summer waiting eagerly for the news of a shark attack. The creatures were so intriguing, so exotic, that I almost found myself jealous. I wanted to swim with sharks. But then again, I was eight, and had grown out of that by the time I turned ten.

I did not have the desire to swim with sharks again until the option was posed to me. I'd been in South Africa only a few days when the sign up sheets for the weekend outings were posted. Wine tours, sky diving, trip down to Cape Point, sand boarding, shark cage diving.

Swim with sharks?! To my rational adult self, that was completely absurd. Only crazy people swam with sharks. *It is completely dangerous*, I thought to myself. *Doesn't something like, one in two people die from shark attacks?* I was making up statistics in my head to discourage myself from going.

Yet there I stood, one morning before we all piled into our little van, seriously contemplating swimming with the beast of them all, The Great White Shark. Wonga honked the horn, and I scrawled my name on the list before running to the van.

We woke up at five the following Saturday, and had to be in the van no later than five thirty. We each had to put on as many layers as we had, but the cold air still ripped through my jeans, sweatshirt, jacket, and multiple pairs of socks. Faried, another driver for the organization, was a fast driver, and the trip didn't take long at all.

It was still dark out as we pulled up to the crew house. Bleary eyed, I walked inside to see pictures on the walls of great whites in all varieties of great white life: swimming in the ocean and eating. Rows and rows of shirts lined the main room, and in the back was a little dining area. After we were served a small hot breakfast, we had to sign forms roughly proclaiming, "If I am eaten by a shark, it is not this company's fault, and my family cannot sue."

Oh dear, I thought.

One of the crew members handed me another jacket with the letters SDU (Shark Diving Unlimited) embroidered on the back.

“Put this on,” he said, gruffly. As I was sliding my arms into the jacket about ten sizes too big for me, the man turned to me and said, “Leonardo DiCaprio rode on our boat.” He pointed at a picture, and sure enough, there was the Hollywood star smiling, his arms around that particular crew member. “Brad Pitt, too.” He pointed to another photograph before walking away.

As soon as everyone had their jackets on, and we had taken the mandatory pre-event pictures, we walked down to the docks. The winter air whipped around us, and I hunched myself over to conserve body heat. I could see the sun beginning to rise in the distance. And then we were on the boat, the “Barracuda,” heading out to sea at a speed I was not comfortable with.

The instant I put my foot onto the deck I had a sinking feeling that this was going to be a huge mistake. I’d never been on a boat before, and here I was, on a speeding vessel equipped with a cage, heading about a mile out into the South Atlantic Ocean, in the middle of winter, to swim

with what is considered the greatest predator on Earth. Seriously, I must have been crazy.

As we zoomed out to sea, the crew dumped bucket after bucket of pureed tuna into the water, to catch the attention of the sharks. The sun was rising, and everything was coated in gold. Seagulls flew around and behind the boat, on the lookout for pieces of tuna for breakfast. The boat lurched to a stop and we each were handed a wetsuit. Everyone received a black suit, but I got a grey one.

I thought of the Galeano book I'd recently read, *Voices in Time*, that had a short story on sharks.

In movies and books, a cunning and bloodthirsty monster navigates the seven seas with jaws spread wide to reveal his teeth of a thousand knives. He dreams of us and licks his lips.

Outside movies and books, the shark fails to show the slightest interest in human flesh. Rarely does he attack us, and then only in self-defense or by mistake. When a nearsighted shark confuses one of us with a dolphin or a seal, he takes a bite and spits it out. We're a lot of bones and not much meat, and our not-much-meat tastes awful.

We are the dangerous ones, and sharks know it. But sharks don't make films or write novels.⁴²

⁴² Eduardo Galeano, *Voices of Time: A Life in Stories* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006): 317.

Well, if sharks accidentally mistook people for seals when they looked like people, what were they going to make of me in a grey wet suit? I did not know if sharks could see color, but the sinking feeling grew deeper as I pulled the suit on over my own red and white polka dot bathing suit.

The cage was already in the water when I came back to the main deck. The top and bottom metal bars were wrapped in green rope, and there were black foam cushions on either side, one in front of the chest, and behind the back. Prison bars were in front of us, and while the bottom was completely caged in (so we wouldn't sink to the bottom of the ocean, I had to assume), the top was open save for a few bars for us to grab on to when we rose again.

Buckets of dead tuna lined the back of the vessel, and the stench was almost overpowering. Almost. My fear was worse.

The crew member in charge of the fish had tied a tuna to the end of a rope and threw it out into the water. He would reel it in slowly, as if he were fishing. I suppose he was fishing, but for sharks. Sharking? Sure. My mind was racing a thousand thoughts per second and I was breathing heavily to calm myself down.

The crewman who had given me the SDU jacket saw me grabbing onto the side of the boat, staring at the cage, and the choppy water. He leaned in close and whispered in my ear, "If you go in the first group, it makes the fear better." He placed his hand on my shoulder, gave it a quick squeeze, and went to tie another tuna to a line.

I got this, I thought to myself. My resolve solidified, I was ready to get in the boat. Then I saw the fins come out of the water and I realized, *Shit. It's right there. Feet away from me.* Then my hand was grabbed and a weighted belt placed across my chest. I felt a grip around my waist as I climbed on the side of the boat and splashed into the cage.

The water was cold, which did not help ease my trembling. My water shoes filled instantly with water, and the weight around my neck felt strangling. My goggles were too tight. One more person got in after me; there were six of us in the cage. It felt too cramped. Even though I was full of complaints, I barely had time to get myself adjusted in the cage when a voice from a few feet above me boomed, "DOWN!"

I took a huge gulp of air and forced myself fully into the water. The first thing I saw were teeth. Lots of sharp teeth.

“JESUS CHRIST!” I screamed under water. All that came out were some gurgling sounds and a bunch of bubbles. And just as quickly as I had seen it, the shark was gone.

I came up gasping for breath, and looked at those around me. We were all screaming, “That was so awesome!” and “Did you see how big it was?” We all felt pretty good about ourselves for getting through the first dive. The next ones would be a cake walk.

The second time we went down I was stunned to see, not a shark, but a school of little blue and yellow fish directly in front of me outside the bars. The one in front tilted slightly, and the rest of the fish followed. I also tilted my head at the fish, because I was in awe that *that* was right in front of me. I think the fish were curious as to what this giant grey thing was, with those funny looking things over its eyes. I could see us both thinking, “What a bizarre creature.”

After about ten minutes, they pulled us out of the cage, one by one, and helped the second group in. Everything was going normally, and I was leaning against the side of the boat, watching the sharks swim around us.

There was a scream that was not a man yelling “Down.” I looked to my left and a shark had breached.

A little back story on Great Whites and breaching. The only place on the planet where great white sharks jump out of the water to catch their prey is in South Africa. It’s called breaching. It’s incredible to see footage of a shark breaching, but it’s down right flooring in real life. Especially because it was only a few feet away from me. And right on top of the people in the cage.

The crewman had pulled the tuna in too quickly, and the shark, wanting to eat it, got excited and used its momentum to propel itself out of the water and nearly on top of the cage. Everyone on board was screaming in fear, everyone in the cage was trying to hold their breath for as long as they could, and all of the crewmen were trying to figure out how to get the shark back into the water.

I stood still and gawked in wonder. To be perfectly frank, I was a little jealous that I was not in the cage.

The grey skin, coated with sea water and pureed tuna, glistened in the sunlight. The massive mouth filled with teeth sharp enough to sever an artery gleamed in the sunlight as the shark awkwardly ate the tuna.

And then it splashed back in the water, and the boat rocked back and forth rather violently. I had to grab onto the railing to steady myself from falling over.

Once the shark was back in the water, almost everyone in the cage wanted to come out. I, on the other hand, decided to go back in. I geared myself up, had the weights placed across my chest, and was hoisted back into the cage. There was only me and two others.

The water felt different the second time. Instead of being a little chilly, it felt freezing. It was also murkier than it had been, and as the waves that rocked the boat had seemed gentle on deck, we in the cage were thrown from front to back, each time slamming into the foam cushions. The water was rising higher with each passing minute, and the sharks eventually started swimming away. We were lifted out, one by one.

Once out of the water, to which I had grown accustomed, the cold air hit me like a blast of ice, and I began shivering immediately. My body shook in involuntary convulsions; it was nearly impossible to get my wet suit off myself. One of the crew members helped me peel the heavy grey material off and pull my jeans and jackets back on. I was told my lips

were turning blue, and was handed a blanket to keep warm on the ride back to shore.

Before we started our trek back to land, we made a quick detour to see Seal Island, which was quite near to where we were. Seal Island is exactly what it sounds like: an island covered with seals. These seals are Cape Fur seals, and are the primary food source for the great whites off the Western Cape. There are thousands of these creatures beached on the small rock that serves as the island, as well as swimming in the water. The seals are the primary reason Great Whites breach: when the seals are swimming in the water, the sharks attack them from below. The sharks swim underneath the seal and launch themselves into the air. If the seal swims at the murky bottom, the shark cannot see it, and the seal is saved.⁴³

As I watched the seals on the rock and in the water, I found myself thinking of my past. The seals, playing so carelessly, seemed completely unaware of the danger lurking just a short distance away. They frolicked in the water, and danced with one another, never suspecting their lives were in any peril. The shark, in time, would swim up to the untroubled

⁴³ Aidan R. Martin, *White Shark Predatory Behavior at Seal Island*, http://www.elasmo-research.org/education/white_shark/predation.htm (2003).

seals and stealthily eat one. Would the other seals immediately notice their companion had disappeared?

The relationship between predator and prey always makes an interesting story. We, the prey, find ourselves taken advantage of, literally eaten alive, by the predators. So many times, instead of fighting back, we succumb to the compelling argument of an abuser's lips or fists. How do we deal with this torment? Why do we continue to let these monsters control our movements? We allow them because we are scared. The seals could leave the island. But they are scared, and they are comfortable there. They adapt. We adapt.

We remain scared until we find a way out. The seals have their method of swimming to the murky bottom, out of reach of the mostly blind Great White. We begin to feel the pull away from the brute in our lives, and hopefully we have a safety net to catch us. I was lucky, and my family was there to help me pull myself back. Sometimes we must escape on our own. Regardless of how, we always find a way, lest we perish.

I realize now that I served a purpose for my abuser. He would treat me in whatever manner he chose, because he knew I would not leave him, no matter the cost. I was too carefree, too naive, too trusting, when he

came into my life. I held onto every word he said. He was my savior. At the time, I did not see that he was eating me alive, as a shark eats a seal. I saw him as injured; he was someone who needed to be taken care of. I believed myself to be the one to do that. I could mend his wounds, no matter how deep, and I would do it until he eventually realized that he had taken almost everything I had. I had nothing left to give him; I had nothing left to give myself. I began to sink to the bottom of my ocean, and he, unable to eat me anymore, swam away, jaws open, ready for another innocent victim.

* * * * *

To me, sharks are incredible creatures. Yes, they are scary. Their powerful jaws can tear something (or someone) to pieces in very few bites, and many believe that sharks leave a path of destruction wherever they swim. But that is not important.

What is important, though, was my reluctance to swim with the sharks. Of course it is perfectly rational for any person to be uneasy about willingly putting himself/herself in harm's way. I was hesitant to sign up, but then I did. I was even more hesitant to get into the cage, but once I had, I didn't want to get out again. I am disinclined from taking part in

anything dangerous, until I actually take the leap. Once in the thick of the danger, I don't want to come out again. Risky endeavors excite me.

South Africa is quite a perilous country. For years on end, it has been considered the rape and murder capital of the world. It is a Realm of Crime, if you will. It is incredibly unsafe to take the train by yourself, and you must never walk alone at night.

Once, I was taking a train down to Fishoek with Tendai, a friend I had made who was from Zimbabwe. As the train rattled down the coast, a group of *tsotsis* (thugs) boarded and sat down close to us. Tendai watched them watching us, and after only a minute or two, insisted we move to another train car. He was visibly shaken, and even though he was a powerfully built man, Tendai was no match for the knives the *tsotsis* likely carried.

The crime situation in South Africa places a tremendous burden on the country. Most of the people are not violent. To say they all enjoyed violent culture would be a gross exaggeration. However, because of the history of apartheid, the white-on-black and black-on-black violence, and international viewing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

hearings, many people view all South Africans as being wholly barbaric, even though many had nothing to do with the brutality at all.

In 1993, a young American Fulbright scholar, Amy Biehl, traveling through Gugulethu, another township outside Cape Town, was stoned and stabbed to death by a mob of angry young black youths. Amy had been working in South Africa and was a part of the end of apartheid solution. She was “a comrade.” She was killed because of her skin color, and because “the township youth were totally out of control.”⁴⁴ Three of the men were convicted for her murder, but all of them were pardoned during the TRC. Subsequently, her parents created the Amy Biehl Foundation Trust, in an effort to urge black youth to rebel against violent behavior.⁴⁵

“Since 1994, [South Africa] has experienced jobless growth...[which has] exacerbated a number of negative social trends, such as spiraling crime and creeping corruption as well as serious social disparities - not only between black and white but also between the newly enriched...black

⁴⁴ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “Who’s the Killer? Popular Justice and Human Rights in a South African Squatter Camp,” *Social Justice* vol. 22, no. 3(61), Racial and Political Justice (Fall, 1995): 146.

⁴⁵ For more information on the Amy Biehl Foundation: www.amybiehl.org.

middle class and a poor, mostly uneducated mass.”⁴⁶ The imbalance between the black middle class and the uneducated black citizens is one of the core reasons for the current violence. During the 1980s and early 1990s, black-on-black aggression rose, but presently, the cruelty is not a color issue, it is a class issue. Far more uneducated blacks go without money and jobs, and *tsotsis* begin to act with such savagery against those in higher classes. The *tsotsis* steal and murder the rich, so that they, too, can share in the wealth.

When the African National Congress (ANC) took over the government and Nelson Mandela⁴⁷ was elected president in 1994,⁴⁸ one of the main goals of the new constitution and Bill of Rights was to give everyone equal rights. “We might have our differences, but we are one people with a common destiny in our rich variety of culture, race and tradition,” Mandela said in his victory speech. And yet Mandela, in all his good-heartedness, was naive. He believed that the ANC being in power meant that the country would heal rapidly from the lashes of apartheid.

⁴⁶ Chris Alden and Garth le Pere, “South Africa’s Post-Apartheid Foreign Policy: From Reconciliation to Ambiguity?” *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 31, no. 100, Two Cheers? South African Democracy’s First Decade (Jun., 2004): 287.

⁴⁷ Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, after serving twenty-seven years.

⁴⁸ Apartheid was taken apart during 1990-1993. The National Party, responsible for apartheid, was voted out of office and replaced by the ANC.

He wished to start anew with South Africa: "This means creating jobs building houses, providing education and bringing peace and security for all."⁴⁹ While he knew it would be a hard process, it seems that he did not expect it to take so long. Over fifteen years later, the country is still battling against racial discrimination, poverty, corruption, and extreme amounts of violence. "These institutions cannot simply be abolished by...a new constitution or a universal Bill of Rights."⁵⁰

The black South Africans make the best of a bad situation. The danger of crime ridden South Africa will live on, just as the sharks and seals will continue their game of survival. Both predator and prey need each other to survive.

⁴⁹ Nelson Mandela's victory speech, http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Election_Victory_15727.html (May 2, 1994).

⁵⁰ Scheper-Hughes, 160.

Thato

We weren't supposed to have favorites in the classroom. Teaching is almost like parenting, and the dictum of being a parent is that you are not to have a favorite child. While that's probably the best theory if you're trying to have a balanced household, in practice, things don't always work out so neatly.

Until I realized that I had a favorite child, I didn't know that having one could cause so many conflicting emotions. I felt guilty paying too much attention to him and not enough to the others, but I also felt guilty not giving him as much attention or praise as I might have.

His name was Thato.⁵¹

He had turned five two days before I turned twenty-one. He was a small, thin boy, and had all the appearances of being a township child. His little grey slacks were too short for him and holes had been worn in both knees. His shoes were never tied because they were too small for him. He owned one pair of socks, grey with black horizontal stripes. He had one set of play clothes which he wore every Friday. His jeans were permanently stained with dirt and grime, and his grey sweatshirt never

⁵¹ Pronounced Tah-toe. This is a Sesotho name, meaning will. Thy *Will* be done. The Lord's Prayer

came off. Despite all that, everyday he seemed well put together. His shirt was tucked in and his shoes had been polished. His pull-on sweater had been beaten to get out the dust, and his short tufts of hair had been brushed. ! Thato was always the first to run up to me when I walked into the classroom. His arms barely reached my hips, but he hugged me with such force that, some mornings, I would have to pry his arms from around me so we could get started with our daily lessons.

Thato was of a lighter complexion than most children in the school. His mother Sharon,⁵² a teacher at Little Flowers, was lighter skinned as well. Afrikaans blood, as well as the blood of slaves, very likely ran through the veins of Sharon and Thato. Through generations of racial mixing, be it by force or consent, they had lighter skin.

When I first laid eyes on Thato, he seemed like any other child in the room - chatty, excited, and the clear victim of abject poverty. Initially, he was very shy. In fact, most of the children were a little sheepish in the beginning. It seemed like they didn't know what to make of me. Here I was, a white woman who smiled all the time and didn't speak their language, in their classroom.

⁵² Her African name is Nondumiso. Because Sharon was a teacher at Little Flowers, Thato was able to attend free of charge, which was a considerable help to their family.

Have they been taught to be suspicious of, and hate, every white person? I thought to myself, that first day. I wasn't sure I knew the answer, and I am still pained when I think about it. The United States carries a legacy of slavery, and many children are still conditioned to mistrust one another. I worried this was the case in South Africa as well, with such a deep history of slavery and legalized racial oppression.

But when those kids smiled at me, I knew they were okay with my presence. It didn't seem to matter to them that I was white and American. I was a novelty. Their curiosity outweighed whatever prejudices they might have had against me.

The first week at Little Flowers, when the other children were stuck to my side, Thato seemed indifferent to my being there. He didn't follow me around, play with my hair, or try to vie for my attention the way the other children did. He was perfectly content digging in the sand or swinging on the tire swing with other students.

One day, I was assigned to another class, and it was then that Thato's demeanor changed. At play time, he ran up to me and hugged me in a way I've never been hugged before. His little arms were wrapped so

tightly around my hips that it felt like he was trying to pick me up. From that moment on, Thato was never far from my side.

It didn't take him long to become possessive of me. Whenever other children wanted me to do something, he would have to be standing there watching. He needed to be around me. He loved holding my hand and being held in my arms. He loved watching me try to teach the alphabet, or how to write numbers. He just loved me. And I loved him.

Shortly before I left South Africa, Sharon pulled me aside and said, "Teacher, Thato speaks of you constantly. Whenever we get home, he runs to his grandmother and tells her of his day, and what you two did together. Throughout dinner, he talks about how beautiful and how nice you are."

I blushed uncomfortably, but to think my favorite child was talking about me like that also made me smile.

"We've had other volunteers, Teacher." I nodded my head. I assumed that she would tell me this behavior of Thato's was not new; he had felt this way of the other volunteers. "Yes, we've had other volunteers, but he loves you the most."



Thato

The day before I left Little Flowers, a group of boys and I were sitting on the blacktop, in a huddled mass. Kwezi, Njabulo, Unati, Phiwe, Lukho, and Lathitha were all sitting around me, but Thato had squeezed his way onto my lap. Each boy was in competition for my attention. There was pushing and pulling.

“HEY!” I shouted. The boys could tell by my tone that I wanted them to stop and they did.

Then Thato turned around and looked at me square in the face. “Teacher!” He yelled. His face was serious, his brow furrowed. “Teacher!” He yelled again. I looked at him, patiently. He began to bark like a dog.

This was a game we played, the boys and I. Instead of speaking to each other, we would make animal noises and giggle. I began to cluck like a chicken, and as they roared with laughter, I switched to a cow's moo. Their bodies squirmed as they guffawed. I could feel my legs tingling under the weight of three little boys, and Misiwe, the lead teacher of our class, called everyone in for lunch just in time.

After lunch, I waited for Wonga, the driver who would take me back to Cape Town. The children all lay on the classroom floor for their afternoon naps, and I sat on the white chairs with Misiwe. I was looking fondly at the small figures on the floor, all pretending to be asleep, when I felt Misiwe's eyes on me. I looked over at her and smiled.

"Do you have a favorite, Teacher?"

"Misiwe, isn't it wrong to have a favorite?"

"No, Teacher, we all have favorites. My favorite is Zizo, because she never sees her mother. Her mother works nights. So, I bring her chips every day. If I do not, she will have nothing." Misiwe exhaled slowly.

"We all have favorites."

Misiwe's speech was so matter of fact; it took me a moment to respond.

“I didn’t know that, Misiwe.” I swallowed, and looked over the heads of the children. “Thato.”

“Ah, yes.” Misiwe nodded. “Thato,” she breathed. “Thato Klaas,” she said louder. Thato’s head popped up from the floor.

“Teacher?” He rubbed his eyes with his little fists. It appeared he had been asleep, after all. Misiwe beckoned him to us with her finger. He hopped up and walked toward us, looking confused.

Misiwe turned to Nelly, another teacher, and said something in isiXhosa. Nelly nodded her head and walked out of the room.

“Thato, do you love Teacher?”⁵³ She pointed at me. I swallowed hard. Thato nodded his head, looking at me and Misiwe. I straightened from the chairs on which I was leaning and backed away slightly. Misiwe also stood and Thato, who was right in front of her, took a step back.

“Thato, you must really love Teacher.” Nelly returned to the classroom, and behind her was Sharon.

Thato visibly swallowed, and replied, “Yes, Teacher. I love her.”

⁵³ Thato did not speak English very well, but he understood more than he let on. He was a smart child, and he usually knew what was being said when English was used.

Misiwe, Nelly, and Sharon because to titter slightly. All three were standing around him, encircling his small frame. He began to shake faintly; he was clearly nervous.

“Thato, do you want to go to America with Teacher?” Thato looked at all three women, and then at me. I looked away. “Do you?” Misiwe repeated her question.

Nelly chimed in, “Yes, Thato, Teacher will take you to America and give you a whole new life. She will take care of you.” Thato had begun to tremble more visibly.

“She is leaving tomorrow, and you won’t ever see her again unless you go to America with her,” Sharon interjected. Thato’s eyes began to well with tears, and I had to look away again.

Several of the children still on the floor had raised their heads to see what was going on. My cheeks were red with shame. I wanted to swoop in and take Thato from this horrible situation, but I knew I could not.

“Thato. Answer me.” His mother commanded.

The small child looked up at all three women and then at me. His little eyes could hold no more tears, and they began pouring down his cheeks. “Yes, Mama. I want to go to America.”

The women began to cackle. Thato could not comprehend the great distance between the United States and South Africa, nor did he know that his mother and his teachers were making fun of him, and his affection for me. Thato stood his ground, but continued to cry.

I saw the white van pull up to the gate. I grabbed my things and bolted out of the classroom, hastily wiping the tears from my eyes.

The next morning, when I arrived at Little Flowers, Thato did not hug me in the way he normally did. I was concerned about what had happened the previous day, so I went up to him, but he ran from me. I had other things to take care of, but I needed to know that he was okay.

Misiwe told me he was fine, and we went along with the activity I had planned for that day. I had spent the evening cutting out pictures of the children so they could decorate them and give the finished products to their parents. As each child decorated, and I walked around and helped those who needed it, Thato could not take his eyes off of me.

I laid each picture down to dry while everyone went outdoors to play. Then I realized Thato had stayed inside. I turned around, and saw him standing by the door. We looked at each other, and he ran to me and

flung his arms around me. I held him close, and kneeled down to look him in the face.

“I’m going to miss you so much, Thato,” I whispered. He hugged me again.

“Me too, Teacher.”

We walked outside, and children started running up to me. They screamed and pulled me in all directions. I decided to go to the playground and give piggy back rides. As I hoisted each child onto my back, they screamed with delight. After running around the playground numerous times, we all ran to the blacktop by the classrooms.

I looked like the Pied Piper, playing my song as the children ran behind and around me.

I plopped down on the ground by the principal’s office, and children swarmed around me. Thato was again on my lap, but Azazole was fighting him for it. Thato began to tear up, and I could not bear to see him like that. I looked around at the children and smiled. It was time to play our game.

I began to howl.

I bayed my loudest and my longest howl. The children fell silent and stopped pushing each other as they looked at me. Then they, too, began to howl. We wailed for a long time, each of us in our own way. The cacophony brought an audience; all of the teachers and many of the children came to see what was happening.

As I let out my final, most painful howl, Thato wriggled into my arms and buried his face in my shoulder. I kissed the top of his head lightly and whispered, "I love you, Thato."

He lifted his head up to me and whispered back. "I love you too, Teacher."

I wiped the tears from my eyes and contemplated this little figure sitting on my lap, who had stolen my heart. He looked back at me with an angelic face, his eyes still full of tears.

"Thato, I need you to listen to me." He looked at me. "I need you to really listen to me." He nodded fervently. I grabbed the pinky finger on his right hand and hooked it in mine. "This is a pinky promise. This promise cannot be broken. Do you understand me?" He nodded. "I promise, Thato. I promise that in ten years, I will come back and find you." He simply looked at me through tremulous tears. "Do you

understand me? In ten years, I will come back to South Africa. I will come back to Khayelitsha. And I will find you. And I will make sure you are okay. Do you understand?" My voice was wavering. I wanted to take him away, to save him from the life of hardship I knew was ahead of him.

"Yes, Teacher, I understand." He threw his arms around my neck and whispered, "I love you."

I could barely make out the words, "I love you too, Thato," because Wonga turned onto the street. I held Thato in my arms as I gathered my things for the last time. He was crying into my shoulder, and I was holding back my tears.

Each of the teachers embraced me. Misiwe looked at me and said, "Thank you, Teacher. For everything." She had tears in her eyes as well. She touched my face, and then I walked out of the gates.

The children streamed onto the street to watch me get in the van. I was still holding Thato in my arms. He did not want to let go of me, so I whispered in his ear, "I promise to find you."

He raised his head. His cheeks were tear-stained and his eyes were red. "I have to go, Thato." He shook his head intensely. His eyes welled

again; they were telling me not to go. "I have to, little boy." He kissed me on the cheek, and allowed me to put him down.

I got into the van, and he walked back through the gates. As Wonga pulled away, all the children were waving excitedly to us, but Thato held onto the chain link fence and cried.

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