

Black and White in Color

"I'm not interested in a nice Jewish boy from Johannesburg," said Denise. We were waiting to see who would turn up to share our physics laboratory space.

"What have you got against nice Jewish boys?" I asked.

"They're so boring."

I had just entered Medical School at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. I was eighteen, fresh out of high school, full of arrogance, conceit and high hopes. Similar to most white girls my age, my life had been insulated. I had attended an all-girls' whites-only school and the suburb where I grew up was restricted by law to white families. I had no social contact with any person of color, other than the maid who cooked for my mother and the middle-aged Zulu man whom we called the garden boy. The University was racially integrated and as such was railed against by the Nationalist press as being a hotbed for liberals and "kaffir boeties." "N-word lovers" would be the closest translation.

In reality, with overwhelming odds against graduating from high school, very few non-white students were able to attend. About 5 % of the total student body was not white, according to the quota system. Each major city had its university, either English speaking or Afrikaans speaking, but Witwatersrand was the sole option for non-white students in South Africa. I was quite sure how my father, a staunch supporter of the Apartheid government, would feel about my attending a place with a diversity of students. But Wits was my home town university, and I had no other option but to be among all those "other people," as my father grumbled. I had no idea how *I* would react to this. To top it all, I was one of only twenty women out of a class of a hundred and life itself seemed about to alter radically.

And there was Denise grouching about Jewish boys. I remembered days spent under the shade of a jacaranda tree, when we were fourteen, discussing her desire to convert to Judaism. Her father was a German Jewish refugee, who had escaped from Berlin in the thirties, and her mother an English woman from Liverpool. We skipped Biology classes and talked about weighty topics such as religion, sex and politics.

I saw her eyes flicker with interest as our new lab partner came up and introduced himself. He was tall, with heavy lidded black eyes, and moved with a panther like grace. His name was Ahmed Jajbahy.

"Just call me AJ – everyone calls me that."

He had an ease and a confidence with his new classmates, far more than we had with him. I wanted to apologize constantly for everything bad that had happened to him in the name of apartheid. Opposite our bench was Chris Van Niekerk, a stout, red faced Afrikaans boy from one of the small towns near Johannesburg. He was a Nationalist Party follower, a true believer in apartheid and the rule of the white minority. His father was a pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church, the official religion of the Nationalist Party, stern and Calvinistic, no Blacks allowed. We would often get into heated arguments as to how Chris could possibly feel superior to AJ, who was taller, richer, better looking, a cooler dresser and got higher grades.

"I'll tell you why, exactly," Chris said. "I'm white and he's not."

AJ was standing in front of Chris and though I burned with embarrassment and shame for him, he just laughed off the whole incident with a shrug.

A few weeks later Denise asked me to go to the movies with her.

"There's a catch. I'm going to meet AJ as well. I need you for moral support."

I wasn't that surprised. Lots of boys were mad for her. She did not have a perfect body, her hips were wide and her ankles thick, but she had shiny brown hair and beautiful skin. When she smiled, she looked like the young, sexy Elvis.

I also knew what she wanted from me. Whites and non-whites, who were officially classified by the Nationalistic Government into Blacks, Asians and Coloureds, were not permitted to attend movies, parties or any social gatherings together. In fact, a meeting of more than three people of mixed races would be construed as conspiring to hatch a political plot, and thus be anti-government. My interest was piqued and I had few feelings of misgivings. It seemed like a great adventure—and I was more than a little fascinated by their sexual daring. Besides, I was really

curious about AJ, where he lived, how he managed to always look so well turned out. I knew some of the Black students from Soweto, the large Black township outside Johannesburg, must have had a hard time. No electricity, no running water, many people crammed into one room and a two-hour train ride every morning to make classes. How did they cope? Most white students lived at home with Mummy and Daddy with plenty of food to eat and had their own room to study in.

We set off together one Friday night for the Indian township of Fordsburg. In the previous century it had been the place for Eastern European Jewry to make a living before moving on to more affluent suburbs. It felt like a foreign country. The main street was filled with shops and tantalizing aromas from stalls full of exotic foods, none of which I could recognize. Women in brightly colored saris milled around and I did not hear any English spoken. AJ's family had a small shop which sold fabric for saris. He met us outside and introduced us to his sisters, two shy and pretty younger girls.

The cinema was a few stores down and we bought our tickets and went in. "South Pacific" was the feature. Denise and AJ sat together and I took a seat next to his sister, Sameera. As the lights dimmed, I sensed, rather than saw, that they were holding hands. I could hear them breathing rapidly. Suddenly, I was overcome, nauseous and sweaty, about what we were up to. This was no schoolgirl's prank, defying the teacher. We were up against the big game, the Special Branch, for God's sake! They killed women and children, shot them in the back as they were fleeing. The Sharpeville massacre had occurred only a few years earlier; hundreds of people had been slaughtered. The police were ruthless murderers. Not only that, there was the infamous Immorality Act which banned sex between the races, especially Black and white. The crime of miscegenation it was called; what a terrible connotation. We could all go to prison, or be thrown out of the country with an exit visa and no passport. What resources did I have? I knew nobody outside of my family, no one in America or England or Israel who would take care of me if that were to happen. What could I do and where would I go? I could hardly breathe.

The movie was incomprehensible. The Board of Censors had cut the scenes between the white lieutenant and the island girl in case it would incite the Blacks to commit unspeakable acts of rape and violence. I glanced sideways at Denise and AJ and saw them kissing. Where was the nearest damn exit? I was seized with real fear that there were spies in the audience, that the Special

Branch were lurking in the row behind us and could see the caresses that Denise and AJ were exchanging. How could they miss us, two silly white girls in a sea of Black faces?

But nothing happened. We said our goodbyes to AJ and his sisters and Denise drove us back to Johannesburg. We were silent in the car.

A few weeks later my parents had to go out of town. They didn't want me to be alone in the house so I moved in with Denise for a week. There was a pool and a tennis court in the garden and her father had an impressive, book lined study. He was an urbane European and we sat in comfy leather chairs, smoking cigarettes and drinking gin and tonic in crystal glasses. There were books from floor to ceiling and he would discuss German authors I had never read. Politically, he was far more liberal than my father. He spoke at length about his escape from Germany and though I found his heavy accent hard to follow at times, his stories were endlessly interesting to me. Denise's mother fluttered around us, in her soft English way. I felt pampered and sophisticated and in an exhilarating world much different from my own.

Later that night, when we were about to fall asleep, Denise said to me:

"Linda, would you give me the key to your house while your folks are gone? It's so difficult – we have nowhere to go and it's so damn dangerous. The police are everywhere and they're always shining their bloody lights into parked cars. It would be fantastic to be in a real bed with him. "

How could I refuse my best friend? I did have the key to the house, which was empty; the maid had gone to her village to see her own family and only Philomen, the gardener, was in the servant's quarters at the rear of the house. He wouldn't notice anything; he was usually high on the "dagga" he smoked constantly. He had cultivated several specimens behind my mother's sunflowers and she, of course, would never recognize a marijuana plant. She watered them on his day off. However, I was reluctant.

"My dad will kill me if he finds out. You know he's totally verkramp, not like your dad."

Verkramp meant that he was extremely right-wing and conservative. My father was a good, kind man, except for his politics, where we clashed all the time. I used to tease him that on his gravestone we would write: "Here lies Morris Berman, born a Jew, died an Afrikaner." He was

soundly pro government; he felt loyalty towards a country which had given Jews a safe haven. He never physically mistreated a Black person, but he did regard "them" as second-class citizens. What would he think if he knew one of "them" was in his house, in his bed? He would never forgive me for allowing a non-white into his house without permission, which he would never, ever give, under any circumstances. He still held the purse strings: I felt my whole future as a doctor hung in the balance.

Denise burst into tears. I had never seen her cry; she was always so self – possessed and confident, striding out into the fray without hesitation, while I followed, unsure of my motives and being happy to have someone else make the decisive move.

"We really love each other. This is the real thing – I'm certain of that. I'll die if we don't have at least one time together, as normal people do. There's nowhere else to go, what else we can do? It's so hopeless."

Such a display of raw emotion was beyond my limited experience with the timid boys I'd dated. I was powerless in the face of her distress and I felt myself dissolving into acquiescence. What must it feel like, to want and desire someone so strongly? Bloody hell, I thought. How can I be so mean spirited as to deny them a modicum of happiness, a glimpse through that low door into another world, that world of ecstasy and pleasure, that world of which I was totally ignorant? I suddenly felt empowered, and sure of my decision. I could brave my father's wrath, the government's heavy hand and the iniquity of separating two lovers who deserved their place in the sun.

"Be careful. Old Mrs. Krueger, the neighbor opposite, is always peering out to see who comes and goes. So try and be a little discreet, if you can."

My parents lived in a small bungalow with a low hedge and a garden gate which opened onto the sidewalk. There was no driveway and one had to park outside the house on the street. Anyone who happened to be looking at that moment would have no difficulty in seeing who went in and out of the house. I hoped Mrs. Krueger would be asleep when they get there, and that my father would never find out.

She came back to her house in the early morning. The lie she fed her parents about staying away all night was accepted without comment. But I felt strange; we were each sleeping in the other's house, almost as if we had changed places. She sat down on the edge of her bed and kicked off her shoes. There was a heavy smell of musk about her. I was dying to question her, to find out everything that had happened.

"Did anyone see you when you left the house, or was it too dark? Hope you didn't make too much noise."

"Don't worry so much. We were as quiet as can be. But it was a good thing Philomen had passed out -- we had to step over his body!"

She fell asleep almost immediately and my questions went unanswered.

I tried to concentrate on my studies; physics was not my strong suit and my boyfriend, who was a nice Jewish boy a year ahead of me, was patient enough to tutor me in the vagaries of circuits and Archimedes' principle.

When I moved back into my own house, I could not shake the feeling that the curtains across the street parted a little bit every time I came home. I did my best to avoid meeting Mrs. Krueger face to face, but inevitably we bumped into each other at the local greengrocers. She looked intently at me and I could feel her eyes boring through me. Surely she must have seen Denise and AJ walk through the gate. Every time the doorbell rang I was certain that it was the Broederbond, a band of vigilante thugs, coming for me.

Paranoia was everywhere. The government started arresting people and imprisoning them for ninety days without trial. Many in our class protested in front of the University. I kept my banner high in front of my face so that my father would not see me on his way home from work, but it slipped now and then and I was sure that would be the exact moment for his car to drive by. As we marched through Hillbrow, I saw one of my classmates, whose activist aunt was married to a leader in the African National Congress, raise his can of beer and seem to be only interested in getting drunker. The police, with their German shepherd dogs snarling on their leashes, were omnipresent on every street corner. Big Brother was watching all of us.

The headlines read: BOMB IN JOHANNESBURG TRAIN STATION. FIVE PEOPLE KILLED.

The ANC admitted responsibility, but said they had warned the police about the bomb and to keep civilians away. The police ignored the warning. A young mother was one of the victims.

When we went to our physics lab the next day, the lab was off limits to the students and there were grim looking officials everywhere. Scuttlebutt had it that Professor Levy had made the bomb in his lab. Professor Levy? Our mild mannered, softly spoken physics professor who wore open-toed sandals with white socks because of his gouty arthritis, a bomb toting killer?

The government became more and more intrusive; many arrests were made. Denise seemed distracted and there were no more jaunts to the movies in Fordsburg. My father noted disapprovingly that several people who were arrested were left wing Jews, a disgrace to the community, he remarked. How could they do it, bite the hand that fed them? Even the Chief Rabbi of Johannesburg doesn't support that kind of anarchy, as if that were a reasonable stance for the Rabbi to take. It was pointless arguing with him.

Denise and I were drinking coffee in one of the cafes in Hillbrow where students liked to hang out. She looked uneasy and jittery and picked crumbs off her croissant.

"Would you look after Honey for me? My dad wants to move to England and I'm off to Israel."

Honey was Denise's special dog. She was a small, yippy Maltese poodle. I hoped that she would get on with my own dog, a fat lazy Daschund called Juno.

"What about you and AJ? Is it all over? What about the love of your life?"

"Look, it was fun and exciting, but I have to think of myself. There's no future here in this goddamn country. Things can only get worse and I don't want to be here when it all blows up. England's too cold for me. I feel really drawn to Israel. My mom wants to go back to England and they aren't keen on Israel. Besides, my father is really nervous about the cops raiding his library..."

Here she stopped, and looked around, to see if anyone was listening to our conversation. No one was near us. But she did not continue. Perhaps he had a stash of banned books or worse, pamphlets or propaganda hidden away behind Thomas Mann. Did I miss something in those stories about dodging Fascists and Nazis?

"Don't look so glum, Linda. You'll come and see me in Israel; it's such a great place to visit. We'll keep in touch. Go on, wish me luck."

I had hardly been out of Johannesburg, let alone the country. I did not have the sort of money to travel anywhere. We had been close friends for six years and I was going to miss her. She had allowed me to see a side of her that was endearing and touching, but her determination, spunk and spirit came through loud and clear. I'm not sure that I would have gone to Fordsburg, or marched without her urging me on. I was no revolutionary, no freedom fighter. No way did I want to risk my own life. I certainly did not support the government and its evil policies, but I wanted change in an orderly fashion, a change that could be brought about by voting the ruling party out of office. That seemed impossible as the majority had no vote. I did not want bombs and violence and death. I was stuck in this godforsaken country forever. The only way for me to leave would be to finish my studies, save up some money and hope to land a residency in a free country somewhere. A futile, faraway dream. And I knew that my father, unlike Denise's parents, would not be supportive of that plan, financially or emotionally. Fat chance, I thought.

But of course, I did eventually leave my homeland for America and I met Denise and her Iranian husband, Hussein, not in Israel, but in London. She seemed content with life.

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## **Black and White in Color by Sheila Swartzman**

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