

On The Edge Of The Escarpment by Brian Binyamin Meyer

His bags are packed and he is ready to go.

Just as they sit down to Sunday lunch his stomach clenches inwards with a bout of nerves. Change and the unknown have always been hard for him. He is now overwhelmed with the thought of starting high school next week, so far from home. 'Why can't they have a high school here in Pilgrim's Rest?' he thinks to himself. But deep down he knows that cannot be. Even the primary school has only two classrooms: grades one and two and standards one to three are all lumped together in the same space. The other, smaller room, is for standards four and five.

He feels a sudden urge for the river and for the familiarity of happy days gone by.

A timid knock sounds on the back door.

Mah throws her hands up into the air. "Nu!" she exclaims, almost toppling her chair as she hurriedly gets up to go through the kitchen to open the door.

"Sakubona, medem."

"Ah, Simon", Mah says, "good day to you too." Then asks how he is: "Kanjani namuhla?" knowing the old man suffers from arthritic fingers.

"I am well, Medem," he doffs his cap and now holds it painfully between bent fingers. With a wizened smile he says "Medem Miz van Zyl she say the van she is leaving at fayif and she say the Smallbaas Teo, she must be there at fayif".

Like many whites in rural areas and mining communities, Mah has picked up Fanagalo, the lingua franca of the many different African tribes. She finds the language to be easily accessible, but still learns new words from her three young sons who seem to have been born with the ability to babble away seamlessly with every black person who passes by. Yet there are certain nuances that amuse her. The word for *he, she, it, him and her*, is simply 'yena', and she now covers her mouth with her hand to hide the smile forming, so as not to embarrass the old man standing before her.

"Bonga," she thanks him. "I will tell Teo that *he* must be there at five," knowing full well that this serene old man will use only the English 'she' to the very day he stops speaking.

"That was Simon", Mah says as she sits back down, "you know, the boy from the Royal Hotel". She looks over at Theodore, her eldest. "Du binst to be there at five," she says in her usual mix of Yiddish and English. Then adds " On the dot! So Mrs. van Zyl says!"

"I'm going down to the river after lunch" Theodore replies.

His two younger brothers chime in together. "Us too!"

Mah is not happy with this after- lunch plan.

"Azoy. Well, du binst to be back at 4", she says pointedly to Theodore. "On the dot!"

'*On the dot*,' so says that Mrs. van Zyl. '*On the dot*.' Such a hoity-toity lady, that Mrs. van Zyl is, Mah thinks to herself. Who is she to say to me, 'if you can learn to speak Fanagalo, why on earth can you not speak Afrikaans?!?' Always going on about the natives doing this and the natives doing that. Huh. If she didn't need those lessons from that Mrs. van Zyl on how to keep her bookkeeping and how to write letters to customers and suppliers in pure and proper English; huh, she would tell that Mrs. van Zyl a thing or two. And she would tell her all of it in Yiddish yet! She should be so lucky! Better to know Fanagalo and listen to what the natives are saying in your own backyard. And does she, that Mrs. van Zyl, ask all those English-speaking Christian church-going ladies of the town if they speak Afrikaans? Huh. So goot, maybe I *would* like to understand the speeches by those Afrikaner politicians who say all those terrible things they will do if they come to power. Thank God for that good man Jan Smuts. He will keep us safe. And thanks be to God that he has taken us into the war on England's side. She panics as she thinks of her Lithuanian cousins and from whom she has not heard for over five months.....

She snaps back to the present. So! maybe I WILL learn Afrikaans one day. But not today. Today I am too busy. And tomorrow too.

New stock has arrived at their general store, and needs to be unpacked and priced.

And Teo won't be here to help me, she realises with a jolt. He will already be 250 miles away in Johannesburg, a whole overnight journey by train.

As they always do, the three brothers march abreast down the street, keeping in time to Theodore's one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three. They cross over Joubert Bridge, stamping their feet harder on the tarred surface, as if testing the strength of the ancient bridge, built way back in 1896.

Just a few days before, Pah had said that's only 45 years ago, but to the boys it's a different century and a different world.

Pah had shaken his head and said it's not so long ago and, you know, I don't think Uptown or Downtown Pilgrim's Rest has changed that much either.

Bertie, the youngest, had quipped that their teacher Miss Holly had taught the entire class, from grade 1 in row 1 to standard 3 in row 5, three weeks ago on the day they'd broken up for the December hols, a new vocabulary word.

"It is PRESUMPTUOUS", she had said, "for a place like Pilgrim's Rest to have both an Uptown and a Downtown; it is, after all, just a village".

"No one liked her after that," Bertie quickly added. "Not after we all understood the word. And I told *her* it was PRESUMPTUOUS for *her* to call me Bertie when my full name is Cuthbert!"

"Oy a klug," Mah lamented. "We have a rebel in the family! Nu, so Cuthbert is only for your birth certificate! So you can have a nice English name. But 'Bertie' is better." She triumphs: "It is what they call the king!"

"Never mind about that!" Theodore had burst out indignantly. "We're bigger than a village! How dare she!"

But Pah had just laughed. "When you start high school in Johannesburg next week", he'd said, " you'll see the difference between city, town and dorp".

From the stoep, Mah watches her boys march down the road, then turns to go back inside. She fetches her *Tzena Urena* from the bunky next to her bed and settles in the wicker chair to read the weeks Torah portion; she'd had no time for that yesterday, during Shabbos, the sabbath. But now she feels too vexed to concentrate. I should have told Teo if you miss the lift there won't be time to get a taxi to Lydenburg, she thinks to herself. And there's no money for that anyway.

She opens the heavy book, and pages through the much-read chapters to where she had left off the previous week. She loves the richness of the Yiddish used in the *Tzena* that tells of the weekly bible story, joined to fables and interpretation with humour and clarity.

She sniffs. Then sniffs again. Yes, the air is redolent with the earthy scent of approaching rain. She glances out the window. Dark clouds are swirling their threatening way over. Oy Gott, she thinks to herself, we're in for a Transvaal thunder storm. And, "oy Gott," she says out loud, "I didn't tell my boys to look after their shoes."

The Blyde River flows swiftly under the bridge. On the far side, at the signpost pointing to Robber's Pass and Lydenburg, the three leave the road and turn right. The way down to the river is easier here. The foliage is thinner than on the Pilgrim's Rest side, and the embankment not as steep. Here they can shimmer down to the water's edge without scratching their calves or skinning knees and elbows. Dusty seat trousers can always be dusted clean with a few well aimed klaps, and scuffed shoe tops polished.

While Hugh and Bertie look for smooth stones to skim and bounce across the water, Theodore gazes out over the river, taking in the town view, as if it were the last time he'd see it. Bright red rooftops peek out over tree tops and behind the town, Mount Sheba looms. He and his brothers had so often come down here to play. Further along, the river splits; the Blyde continues on its course, and a smaller stream creates the Pilgrim's Rest

Creek. Here, in the hazy heat of late summer's days, they'd embarked on voyages across the world or engaged in battle with neighbours, taking turns in being the good guys and then being the bad. And afterwards, red faced and excited, they'd play ching chong cha to decide whether to spend their precious few pennies at Mrs. Mac's general store, or run home for cozies and towels and meet up at the pool. Sometimes Mah would say "it would be nice if maybe you spent the money in OUR shop, and not run so quickly to those swankier places uptown!" And the three would chorus "Oh, Maah."

"Well, our general store has it all too."

Hugh calls to him. "Why the day dreaming?"

Theodore shakes his head. "Lost in the clouds," he says.

The wind quickens and shadows turn the long grass from bright green to a darker hue. Bushes rustle and the chirping of birds quieten. He is now aware of that earthy scent Mah had sensed before, and he looks up and behind. A low rumble of thunder sounds in the distance.

"We'd better get back," he calls to his brothers.

Hugh drops the stones he'd collected and shrugs.

Bertie is about to argue.

Theodore raises his hand slightly. Bertie swallows his words, but takes a minute to turn towards the river and skim a few stones over the gurgling waters. He steps closer to the edge; he'd found a larger than usual extra-smooth stone and is determined to test his ability. Storm or not.

"Bertie!" Theodore cries out.

"I know! I know!" Bertie shouts back. "Bilharzia. Shmilharzia. Don't worry! I won't touch the water!"

They beat the storm home. Mah has moved the wicker chair and is on the stoep, pretending to read from the yellowing pages of her *Tzena Urena*. Although she tries to hide it, Theodore sees her relief as they climb the steps to the garden gate and walk up the path.

Lightning flashes followed closely by a crash of thunder that reverberates through their skin down to the bone. Raindrops splatter, raising dust from the dry sandy path. In quick succession now, clouds roll into each other, sending a cacophony of crashes shuddering through the corrugated-iron walls of the house. Mah hurries over to where Pah is snoozing, to switch the crackling radio off.

"You need to get changed," she says to Theodore. "And go up to the hotel."
She frets. "But in this storm?"

The river and the rain have distracted him.

Now, his nerves are set on edge once more. Gripping his stomach, he grabs the candle and matches, and dashes out the back, sprinting in but a few leaps to the outhouse at the bottom of the garden. Hail larger than those smooth river stones play a symphony of clatter on the thin tin roof.

And Old Man Simon is coming up the path.

"Yintoni?" Mah asks. "What is it?"

Drenched through, yet smiling and oblivious to the pelting rain, he has come with another message. The van from the Royal Hotel will come by to pick Smallbaas Teo up. But earlier. Because of the storm.

"Ipi skati?" Mah says. When?

"Skati Ka half past fo ntamban, Medem."

"Hughie", Mah turns to her middle son. "Tell Teo he's leaving now at half past four."

Mah motions to Simon to come inside, out from the rain. "Wait a bit," she says. "Gahle mbitshan".

But the old man shakes his head. He must return. And, besides, he is already wet.

Theodore is reluctant, but Mah insists.

"You're starting high school," she says. "You must go in long pants."

"But they're the school uniform," Theodore argues. "I don't want to spoil them."

"They'll get more spoilt all creased up in the suitcase," Mah says. "Put them on."

From her purse she withdraws a small envelope.

"Here's some money. It's not a lot. Be careful with it. I don't know when I'll send some more. But Granny Ella can also give you some, when you get to her. And you remember what bus to take from Park Station to Mayfair?"

Theodore nods. Of course, he knows. He's not a complete stranger to Joburg and its suburbs. Carefully, he pockets the money.

The rain has eased when Mr. Stanley comes by in the van. Old Man Simon and a youngster sit in the back.

"Lo-mgwagwa yena lungile pambili," the old man announces.

Mr. Stanley shushes him. "Don't make the missus worry," he admonishes. "The missus doesn't need to know that the road is bad further on. That's why you're here, you and your pickaninny, in case we need to put chains on the wheels. Teo here can't do it, all drressed up and smart. He's our special trraveler today. Gone on, help him with his suitcase."

"Kom young man," Mr. Stanley shakes Teo's hand solemnly. "Grrrowing up, hey. Ja man, happens to all of us!"

Mah has to see to Pah, who has just woken. She kisses her son perfunctorily on his cheek. "Book a call or send a telegraph when you've settled in".

Pah beckons Theodore over. Not feeling well, he can't get up. "Come and shake hands, my boy, for me to wish you good luck."

Bertie has gone quiet. He won't ever admit it. He will miss his older brother.

"Right," Mr. Stanley announces. "The trrain won't wait, even for our honoured scholar!" He checks his watch. "We'll make good time. And that puffing monster isn't always on time to leave Lorenzo Marques. Drives them mad at the Komatipoort border crossing when it's late. Still. Kom nou, Teo. It's getting dark. We've a long drrive ahead. No need to take any chances."

Yet another surprise awaits him at the station in Lydenburg. Mrs. van Zyl is there on the platform.

"What, Teo!" she exclaims. "D'you think I'd let you go without saying goodbye, hey? My favorite seuntjie...."

In the harsh light of the waiting room Theodore blushes deep red.

Mrs. van Zyl laughs delightfully. "I planned to visit to my sister here in Lydenburg together with your going," she explains.

Taking his elbow, she leads him to an empty bench in a quiet corner.

"Ag, look how grrrown up you are, in your langbroeke! But listen, if you don't feel comfortable, change back to your shorts when you're on the trrain. Moenie worry, hey. I won't tell your Mah!"

She touches his hand softly.

"Now, you listen to me, hey. And you listen good."

When you start high school next week, don't you let those city-slicker boys get the better of you, hey!" she says.

"I know how they are," she says. "Maybe they will laugh at you and say you are a country bumpkin. But don't you dare let them. You hear?"

You stand up straight and proud, and you tell them you come from a place like no other!"

Tell them you live on the edge of the escarpment and it is an adventure they cannot even dream of!"

You tell them, tall and proud, hey, that you come from Pilgrim's Rest, where robbers plundered stagecoaches and paid the grisly price if caught."

You tell them that here too, God gave the ground good shiny gold."

You tell them in Johannesburg they have the dusty yellow mine dumps for mountains and scenery, while here you have the Blyde River Canyon and from there, a spitting distance to God's Window, a vista of beauty bestowed by nature on eyesight!"

And where the swirling mist on Long Tom's Pass prevents anyone and everyone from passing through."

She stops to breathe deeply then laughs. "Ag, will you just listen to me! I'm getting old and sentimental! Nee man, you will be fine in Joburg!"

She reaches into her bag and takes out a packet of hardboiled sweets. "Here," she says, "I know your Mah has given you padkos. But here is something sweet for dessert."

In the distant darkness they hear the chuffing of the steam engine well before the train rounds the curve and the engine's yellow beam pierces through the blackness. With a shrill whistle, the rhythm of the metal beast changes. It gives out a long smoke-filled sigh as its wheels slow and the strain from climbing up the steep gradient from Komatipoort ends. The train comes to a screeching halt, wheels hiss water, then all is quiet until carriage doors bang open and passengers alight and board.

Theodore lugs his suitcase, but Mr. Stanley says leave it. It will be easier to pass it through the window. Theodore climbs the two steps and walks down the narrow passageway to his compartment. He heaves the case in, and stows it under the seat. He is alone in the compartment, but there are many stops along the way, and he is sure he will soon have companions.

Another shrill whistle. This time two in quick succession. The station master at the platform end waves his green flag and the train moves forward with a sudden lurch.

Lydenburg station glides past and Theodore looks behind to watch the lights of the town fade and then the train is swallowed back into the darkness of the night.

He sits back, his head leaning on the high cushioned seat. Through the open window the light of the moon gleams high above, and now, with no town lights to interfere, he sees the skies are clear. If he wants, he knows he will sleep well. If he wants, he knows he may stay up the entire time.

Tomorrow beckons and he knows the day will dawn bright and clear.

Written by Brian Binyamin Meyer 11/2022

About this Story:

This story is a work of fiction. I wrote it though, because my late father grew up in Pilgrim's Rest. He didn't speak much about his childhood (and we didn't ask; by the time I finally did, he evasively answered "I don't remember") but Pilgrim's Rest was always there in the background and always made an impression on me. I have tried to weave the little he did tell me into those few hours of one day in which the story takes place. My late grandmother was another source of information. What I most clearly remember from our chats when I was a child, is her awe at the ferocity of summer storms over that area of the escarpment of the (then) Eastern Transvaal.



A visit to Pilgrim's Rest in 2016. The entire town is a national museum.

Date posted on CHOL Share Your Story Site January 2023