

Male
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Thirties
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I Remember: A narrative account of my interactions with racism

As on other occasions that I'd had no control over, my prepubescent anger threatened to overwhelm me and soon we were furiously raining fists on each other. And then somewhere in the midst of the litany of swearing in Xhosa and beating, I uttered the words I most regret, "you kaffir!" The energy of the fight prematurely waned and we both stood there heaving and defeated. I, with a hand to my black and steadily swelling eye, and he with a strange look on his physically unscathed face. I immediately wished that I could erase those words from my mind. I wished my opponent would get up in the morning having forgotten what I'd said.

I don't remember the reason for the fight but I recall that we were neighbours. Like today, back then our homes shared a dusty pathway and a straggly thorn bush fence. We had no electricity and our drinking water was drawn from the same spring by our mothers and sisters. In almost all ways we were socio - economically equal. My father had recently died. The one difference was that the members of my family had a lighter skin tone than others in the village. We were sometimes called 'coloureds' or 'boesman.' Unlike large swathes of the country, there was no segregation in the hinterlands of this 'homeland' village. We all lived side by side as we do today with my family still slightly lighter skinned than the rest of the village.

During the December holidays of the late eighties, my older sisters whom I adored and had recently returned from Durban on a summer break - recounted a story of their visit to the Durban beachfront. The day that they chose to go to the beach was a stinging hot day and their light skins still bore the sunburn marks. The beach front had been crowded. As they prepared to wade into the waves, a group of policemen approached wielding batons. As they drew nearer my sisters made out the hand written words on the policemen's hats: "Whites only beach!"

Soon people were scattering in all directions running away from the police. My sisters joined the running when they saw how expertly the police handled their batons on unsuspecting or tardy 'non – whites.' Afterwards, they watched from the distance and saw how the white women reclaimed the sand as they lay on cotton towels under large colourful umbrellas. They went home feeling hot, burned, and bruised. I do not recall the exact words used but I recall my eldest sister felt empty while the second eldest was seething in anger. These were my older sisters whom I held in awe for living in the big world away from our dusty village. In that moment I felt small and insignificant.

Much later, while the country was in the throes of changing from institutionalised racism to a democracy, I entered a Durban beachfront bar with two other under-aged friends. We sidled up to the bar and to our relief we were served with beer. One of my friends began dancing while I scanned the bar. I was admiring the dramatic sea view when my friend nudged my side. I followed his gaze to his right. A man with greasy hair was staring at us. "This place is getting full of kaffirs," he said taking a sip of his beer and inching away from us as though we were rapidly contaminating the surroundings with our blackness. Our friend had stopped dancing and we were now looking at each other in the deflated atmosphere. For a moment we debated the merits of asserting our new 'rights' by remaining or leaving the establishment. We left.

Having become an adult well into the first decade of democracy, my life trajectory lacks the clarity of my older compatriots which is provided by the marked disjuncture of 1994. For instance, someone ten years my senior is likely to have a very clear sense of the impact of apartheid on their daily lived experience. I, on the other hand was in my early teens with competing dramas in my life at the dawn of democracy. So, looking back to my formative years, my recollection of racism is at best hazy. The three incidences recorded above are possibly the only one's which stand out for the emotional pain that they wrought on my person. But sitting now and thinking back in a focused way, I recognise another feeling.

This one is not as focused. In fact, it weighs in a dull, dreary and indistinct manner. I grew up in the backwaters of the 'Transkei homeland.' In fact, I was about eight years old when I first saw white and Indian people (and a post graduate when I had my first conversation with the former) – and this only happened because this was when I began attending boarding school in another province – the 'real South Africa.' The dreary feeling to which I referred earlier is intricately tied to my rural 'backwater' upbringing. My day to day lived experience was marked by a continuous and relentless racism represented by the inhumane face of poverty. Here the battle is ongoing, scavenging for food in the wilds, sleeping at sunset because there are no candles, etc. This is poverty which at face value is far removed from the white administrators of apartheid. In reality, however, it was masterfully orchestrated from Pretoria since the days when Verwoerd dreamed up the homeland system. Looking back as an adult in 2008, it is less clear which hurts most, the starkly racist incidences narrated above or the dull daily face of poverty of my homeland childhood.