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Apartheid was perfect racism. It took centuries to develop, starting all the way back in 1652 when the Dutch East India Company landed at the Cape of Good Hope and established a trading colony, Kaapstad, later known as Cape Town, a rest stop for ships traveling between Europe and India. To impose white rule, the Dutch colonists went to war with the natives, ultimately developing a set of laws to subjugate and enslave them. When the British took over the Cape Colony, the descendants of the original Dutch settlers trekked inland and developed their own language, culture, and customs, eventually becoming their own people, the Afrikaners—the white tribe of Africa.

The British abolished slavery in name but kept it in practice. They did so because, in the mid-1800s, in what had been written off as a near-worthless way station on the route to the Far East, a few lucky capitalists stumbled upon the richest gold and diamond reserves in the world, and an endless supply of expendable bodies was needed to go in the ground and get it all out.

As the British Empire fell, the Afrikaner rose up to claim South Africa as his rightful inheritance. To maintain power in the face of the country's rising and restless black majority, the government realized they needed a newer and more robust set of tools. They set up a formal commission to go out and study institutionalized racism all over the world. They went to Australia. They went to the Netherlands. They went to America. They saw what worked, what didn't. Then they came back and published a report, and the government used that knowledge to build the most advanced system of racial oppression known to man.

Apartheid was a police state, a system of surveillance and laws designed to keep black people under total control. A full compendium of those laws would run more than three thousand pages and weigh approximately ten pounds, but the general thrust of it should be easy enough for any American to understand. In America you had the forced removal of the native onto reservations coupled with slavery followed by segregation. Imagine all three of those things happening to the same group of people at the same time. That was apartheid.

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## BORN A CRIME

I grew up in South Africa during apartheid, which was awkward because I was raised in a mixed family, with me being the mixed one in the family. My mother, Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah, is black. My father, Robert, is white. Swiss/German, to be precise, which Swiss/Germans invariably are. During apartheid, one of the worst crimes you could commit was having sexual relations with a person of another race. Needless to say, my parents committed that crime.

In any society built on institutionalized racism, race-mixing doesn't merely challenge the system as unjust, it reveals the system as unsustainable and incoherent. Race-mixing proves that races can mix—and in a lot of cases, want to mix. Because a mixed person embodies that rebuke to the logic of the system, race-mixing becomes a crime worse than treason.

Humans being humans and sex being sex, that prohibition never stopped anyone. There were mixed kids in South Africa nine months after the first Dutch boats hit the beach in Table Bay. Just like in America, the colonists here had their way with the native women, as colonists so often do. Unlike in America, where anyone with one drop of black blood automatically became black, in South Africa mixed people came to be classified as their own separate group, neither black nor white but what we call “colored.” Colored people, black people, white people, and Indian people were forced to register their race with the government. Based on those classifications, millions of people were uprooted and relocated. Indian areas were segregated from colored areas, which were segregated from black areas—all of them segregated from white areas and separated from one another by buffer zones of empty land. Laws were passed prohibiting sex between Europeans and natives, laws that were later amended to prohibit sex between whites and all nonwhites.

The government went to insane lengths to try to enforce these new laws. The penalty for breaking them was five years in prison. There were whole police squads whose only job was to go around peeking through windows—clearly an assignment for only the finest law enforcement officers. And if an interracial couple got caught, God help them. The police would kick down the door, drag the people out, beat them, arrest them. At least that's what they did to the black person. With the white person it was more like, “Look, I'll just say you were drunk, but don't do it again, eh? Cheers.” That's how it was with a white man and a black woman. If a black man was caught having sex with a white woman, he'd be lucky if he wasn't charged with rape.

If you ask my mother whether she ever considered the ramifications of having a mixed child under apartheid, she will say no. She wanted to do something, figured out a way to do it,

and then she did it. She had a level of fearlessness that you have to possess to take on something like she did. If you stop to consider the ramifications, you'll never do anything. Still, it was a crazy, reckless thing to do. A million things had to go right for us to slip through the cracks the way we did for as long as we did.

Under apartheid, if you were a black man you worked on a farm or in a factory or in a mine. If you were a black woman, you worked in a factory or as a maid. Those were pretty much your only options. My mother didn't want to work in a factory. She was a horrible cook and never would have stood for some white lady telling her what to do all day. So, true to her nature, she found an option that was not among the ones presented to her: She took a secretarial course, a typing class. At the time, a black woman learning how to type was like a blind person learning how to drive. It's an admirable effort, but you're unlikely to ever be called upon to execute the task. By law, white-collar jobs and skilled-labor jobs were reserved for whites. Black people didn't work in offices. My mom, however, was a rebel, and, fortunately for her, her rebellion came along at the right moment.

In the early 1980s, the South African government began making minor reforms in an attempt to quell international protest over the atrocities and human rights abuses of apartheid. Among those reforms was the token hiring of black workers in low-level white-collar jobs. Like typists. Through an employment agency she got a job as a secretary at ICI, a multinational pharmaceutical company in Braamfontein, a suburb of Johannesburg.

When my mom started working, she still lived with my grandmother in Soweto, the township where the government had relocated my family decades before. But my mother was unhappy at home, and when she was twenty-two she ran away to live in downtown Johannesburg. There was only one problem: It was illegal for black people to live there.

The ultimate goal of apartheid was to make South Africa a white country, with every black person stripped of his or her citizenship and relocated to live in the homelands, the Bantustans, semi-sovereign black territories that were in reality puppet states of the government in Pretoria. But this so-called white country could not function without black labor to produce its wealth, which meant black people had to be allowed to live near white areas in the townships, government-planned ghettos built to house black workers, like Soweto. The township was where you lived but your status as a laborer was the only thing that permitted you to stay there. If your papers were revoked for any reason, you could be deported back to the homelands.

To leave the township for work in the city, or for any other reason, you had to carry a pass with your ID number; otherwise you could be arrested. There was also a curfew: After a

certain hour, blacks had to be back home in the town ship or risk arrest. My mother didn't care. She was determined to never go home again. So she stayed in town, hiding and sleeping in public restrooms until she learned the rules of navigating the city from the other black women who had contrived to live there: prostitutes.

Many of the prostitutes in town were Xhosa. They spoke my mother's language and showed her how to survive. They taught her how to dress up in a pair of maid's overalls to move around the city without being questioned. They also introduced her to white men who were willing to rent out flats in town. A lot of these men were foreigners, Germans and Portuguese who didn't care about the law and were happy to sign a lease giving a prostitute a place to live and work in exchange for a steady piece on the side. My mom wasn't interested in any such arrangement, but thanks to her job she did have money to pay rent. She met a German fellow through one of her prostitute friends, and he agreed to let her a flat in his name. She moved in and bought a bunch of maid's overalls to wear. She was caught and arrested many times, for not having her ID on the way home from work, for being in a white area after hours. The penalty for violating the pass laws was thirty days in jail or a fine of fifty rand, nearly half her monthly salary. She would scrape together the money, pay the fine, and go right back about her business.

My mom's secret flat was in a neighborhood called Hillbrow. She lived in number 203. Down the corridor was a tall, brown-haired, brown-eyed Swiss/German expat named Robert. He lived in 206. As a former trading colony, South Africa has always had a large expatriate community. People find their way here. Tons of Germans. Lots of Dutch. Hillbrow at the time was the Greenwich Village of South Africa. It was a thriving scene, cosmopolitan and liberal. There were galleries and underground theaters where artists and performers dared to speak up and criticize the government in front of integrated crowds. There were restaurants and nightclubs, a lot of them foreign-owned, that served a mixed clientele, black people who hated the status quo and white people who simply thought it ridiculous. These people would have secret get-togethers, too, usually in someone's flat or in empty basements that had been converted into clubs. Integration by its nature was a political act, but the get-togethers themselves weren't political at all. People would meet up and hang out, have parties.

My mom threw herself into that scene. She was always out at some club, some party, dancing, meeting people. She was a regular at the Hillbrow Tower, one of the tallest buildings in Africa at that time. It had a nightclub with a rotating dance floor on the top floor. It was an exhilarating time but still dangerous. Sometimes the restaurants and clubs would get shut down,

sometimes not. Sometimes the performers and patrons would get arrested, sometimes not. It was a roll of the dice. My mother never knew whom to trust, who might turn her in to the police. Neighbors would report on one another. The girlfriends of the white men in my mom's block of flats had every reason to report a black woman—a prostitute, no doubt—living among them. And you must remember that black people worked for the government as well. As far as her white neighbors knew, my mom could have been a spy posing as a prostitute posing as a maid, sent into Hillbrow to inform on whites who were breaking the law. That's how a police state works—everyone thinks everyone else is the police.

Living alone in the city, not being trusted and not being able to trust, my mother started spending more and more time in the company of someone with whom she felt safe: the tall Swiss man down the corridor in 206. He was forty-six. She was twenty-four. He was quiet and reserved; she was wild and free. She would stop by his flat to chat; they'd go to underground get-togethers, go dancing at the nightclub with the rotating dance floor. Something clicked.

I know that there was a genuine bond and a love between my parents. I saw it. But how romantic their relationship was, to what extent they were just friends, I can't say. These are things a child doesn't ask. All I do know is that one day she made her proposal.

“I want to have a kid,” she told him.

“I don't want kids,” he said.

“I didn't ask you to have a kid. I asked you to help me to have my kid. I just want the sperm from you.”

“I'm Catholic,” he said. “We don't do such things.”

“You do know,” she replied, “that I could sleep with you and go away and you would never know if you had a child or not. But I don't want that. Honor me with your yes so that I can live peacefully. I want a child of my own, and I want it from you. You will be able to see it as much as you like, but you will have no obligations. You don't have to talk to it. You don't have to pay for it. Just make this child for me.”

For my mother's part, the fact that this man didn't particularly want a family with her, was prevented by law from having a family with her, was part of the attraction. She wanted a child, not a man stepping in to run her life. For my father's part, I know that for a long time he kept saying no. Eventually he said yes. Why he said yes is a question I will never have the answer to.

Nine months after that yes, on February 20, 1984, my mother checked into Hillbrow Hospital for a scheduled C-section delivery. Estranged from her family, pregnant by a man she could not be seen with in public, she was alone. The doctors took her up to the delivery room,

cut open her belly, and reached in and pulled out a half-white, half-black child who violated any number of laws, statutes, and regulations—I was born a crime.

When the doctors pulled me out there was an awkward moment where they said, “Huh. That’s a very light-skinned baby.” A quick scan of the delivery room revealed no man standing around to take credit.

“Who is the father?” they asked.

“His father is from Swaziland,” my mother said, referring to the tiny, landlocked kingdom in the west of South Africa.

They probably knew she was lying, but they accepted it because they needed an explanation. Under apartheid, the government labeled everything on your birth certificate: race, tribe, nationality. Everything had to be categorized. My mother lied and said I was born in KaNgwane, the semi-sovereign homeland for Swazi people living in South Africa. So my birth certificate doesn’t say that I’m Xhosa, which technically I am. And it doesn’t say that I’m Swiss, which the government wouldn’t allow. It just says that I’m from another country.

My father isn’t on my birth certificate. Officially, he’s never been my father. And my mother, true to her word, was prepared for him not to be involved. She’d rented a new flat for herself in Joubert Park, the neighborhood adjacent to Hillbrow, and that’s where she took me when she left the hospital. The next week she went to visit him, with no baby. To her surprise, he asked where I was. “You said that you didn’t want to be involved,” she said. And he hadn’t, but once I existed he realized he couldn’t have a son living around the corner and not be a part of my life. So the three of us formed a kind of family, as much as our peculiar situation would allow. I lived with my mom. We’d sneak around and visit my dad when we could.

Where most children are proof of their parents’ love, I was the proof of their criminality. The only time I could be with my father was indoors. If we left the house, he’d have to walk across the street from us. My mom and I used to go to Joubert Park all the time. It’s the Central Park of Johannesburg—beautiful gardens, a zoo, a giant chessboard with human-sized pieces that people would play. My mother tells me that once, when I was a toddler, my dad tried to go with us. We were in the park, he was walking a good bit away from us, and I ran after him, screaming, “Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!” People started looking. He panicked and ran away. I thought it was a game and kept chasing him.

I couldn’t walk with my mother, either; a light-skinned child with a black woman would raise too many questions. When I was a newborn, she could wrap me up and take me anywhere, but very quickly that was no longer an option. I was a giant baby, an enormous child. When I

was one you'd have thought I was two. When I was two, you'd have thought I was four. There was no way to hide me.

My mom, same as she'd done with her flat and with her maid's uniforms, found the cracks in the system. It was illegal to be mixed (to have a black parent and a white parent), but it was not illegal to be colored (to have two parents who were both colored). So my mom moved me around the world as a colored child. She found a crèche in a colored area where she could leave me while she was at work. There was a colored woman named Queen who lived in our block of flats. When we wanted to go out to the park, my mom would invite her to go with us. Queen would walk next to me and act like she was my mother, and my mother would walk a few steps behind, like she was the maid working for the colored woman. I've got dozens of pictures of me walking with this woman who looks like me but who isn't my mother. And the black woman standing behind us who looks like she's photobombing the picture, that's my mom. When we didn't have a colored woman to walk with us, my mom would risk walking me on her own. She would hold my hand or carry me, but if the police showed up she would have to drop me and pretend I wasn't hers, like I was a bag of weed.

When I was born, my mother hadn't seen her family in three years, but she wanted me to know them and wanted them to know me, so the prodigal daughter returned. We lived in town, but I would spend weeks at a time with my grandmother in Soweto, often during the holidays. I have so many memories from the place that in my mind it's like we lived there, too.

Soweto was designed to be bombed—that's how forward-thinking the architects of apartheid were. The township was a city unto itself, with a population of nearly one million. There were only two roads in and out. That was so the military could lock us in, quell any rebellion. And if the monkeys ever went crazy and tried to break out of their cage, the air force could fly over and bomb the shit out of everyone. Growing up, I never knew that my grandmother lived in the center of a bull's-eye.

In the city, as difficult as it was to get around, we managed. Enough people were out and about, black, white, and colored, going to and from work, that we could get lost in the crowd. But only black people were permitted in Soweto. It was much harder to hide someone who looked like me, and the government was watching much more closely. In the white areas you rarely saw the police, and if you did it was Officer Friendly in his collared shirt and pressed pants. In Soweto the police were an occupying army. They didn't wear collared shirts. They wore riot gear. They were militarized. They operated in teams known as flying squads, because they would swoop in out of nowhere, riding in armored personnel carriers—hippos, we called them—tanks with enormous tires and slotted holes in the side of the vehicle to fire their guns

out of. You didn't mess with a hippo. You saw one, you ran. That was a fact of life. The township was in a constant state of insurrection; someone was always marching or protesting somewhere and had to be suppressed. Playing in my grandmother's house, I'd hear gunshots, screams, tear gas being fired into crowds.

My memories of the hippos and the flying squads come from when I was five or six, when apartheid was finally coming apart. I never saw the police before that, because we could never risk the police seeing me. Whenever we went to Soweto, my grandmother refused to let me outside. If she was watching me it was, "No, no, no. He doesn't leave the house." Behind the wall, in the yard, I could play, but not in the street. And that's where the rest of the boys and girls were playing, in the street. My cousins, the neighborhood kids, they'd open the gate and head out and roam free and come back at dusk. I'd beg my grandmother to go outside.

"Please. *Please*, can I go play with my cousins?"

"No! They're going to take you!"

For the longest time I thought she meant that the other kids were going to steal me, but she was talking about the police. Children could be taken. Children were taken. The wrong color kid in the wrong color area, and the government could come in, strip your parents of custody, haul you off to an orphanage. To police the townships, the government relied on its network of *impipis*, the anonymous snitches who'd inform on suspicious activity. There were also the blackjacks, black people who worked for the police. My grandmother's neighbor was a blackjack. She had to make sure he wasn't watching when she smuggled me in and out of the house.

My gran still tells the story of when I was three years old and, fed up with being a prisoner, I dug a hole under the gate in the driveway, wriggled through, and ran off. Everyone panicked. A search party went out and tracked me down. I had no idea how much danger I was putting everyone in. The family could have been deported, my gran could have been arrested, my mom might have gone to prison, and I probably would have been packed off to a home for colored kids.

So I was kept inside. Other than those few instances of walking in the park, the flashes of memory I have from when I was young are almost all indoors, me with my mom in her tiny flat, me by myself at my gran's. I didn't have any friends. I didn't know any kids besides my cousins. I wasn't a lonely kid—I was good at being alone. I'd read books, play with the toy that I had, make up imaginary worlds. I lived inside my head. I still live inside my head. To this day you can leave me alone for hours and I'm perfectly happy entertaining myself. I have to remember to be with people.



Obviously, I was not the only child born to black and white parents during apartheid. Traveling around the world today, I meet other mixed South Africans all the time. Our stories start off identically. We're around the same age. Their parents met at some underground party in Hillbrow or Cape Town. They lived in an illegal flat. The difference is that in virtually every other case they left. The white parent smuggled them out through Lesotho or Botswana, and they grew up in exile, in England or Germany or Switzerland, because being a mixed family under apartheid was just that unbearable.

Once Mandela was elected we could finally live freely. Exiles started to return. I met my first one when I was around seventeen. He told me his story, and I was like, "Wait, *what?* You mean we could have *left?* That was an *option?*" Imagine being thrown out of an airplane. You hit the ground and break all your bones, you go to the hospital and you heal and you move on and finally put the whole thing behind you—and then one day somebody tells you about parachutes. That's how I felt. I couldn't understand why we'd stayed. I went straight home and asked my mom.

"Why? Why didn't we just leave? Why didn't we go to Switzerland?"

"Because I am not Swiss," she said, as stubborn as ever. "This is my country. Why should I leave?"

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**Apartheid, for all its power, had fatal flaws baked in, starting with the fact that it never made any sense. Racism is not logical. Consider this: Chinese people were classified as black in South Africa. I don't mean they were running around acting black. They were still Chinese. But, unlike Indians, there weren't enough Chinese people to warrant devising a whole separate classification. Apartheid, despite its intricacies and precision, didn't know what to do with them, so the government said, "Eh, we'll just call 'em black. It's simpler that way."**

**Interestingly, at the same time, Japanese people were labeled as white. The reason for this was that the South African government wanted to establish good relations with the Japanese in order to import their fancy cars and electronics. So Japanese people were given honorary white status while Chinese people stayed black. I always like to imagine being a South African policeman who likely couldn't tell the difference between Chinese and Japanese but whose job was to make sure that people of the wrong color weren't doing the wrong thing. If he saw an Asian person sitting on a whites-only bench, what would he say?**

**„Hey, get off that bench, you Chinaman!”**

**“Excuse me. I’m Japanese.”**

**“Oh, I apologize, sir. I didn’t mean to be racist. Have a lovely afternoon.**

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## LOOPHOLES

My mother used to tell me, “I chose to have you because I wanted something to love and something that would love me unconditionally in return—and then I gave birth to the most selfish piece of shit on earth and all it ever did was cry and eat and shit and say, ‘Me, me, me, me me.’”

My mom thought having a child was going to be like having a partner, but every child is born the center of its own universe, incapable of understanding the world beyond its own wants and needs, and I was no different. I was a voracious kid. I consumed boxes of books and wanted more, more, more. I ate like a pig. The way I ate I should have been obese. At a certain point the family thought I had worms. Whenever I went to my cousins’ house for the holidays, my mom would drop me off with a bag of tomatoes, onions, and potatoes and a large sack of cornmeal. That was her way of preempting any complaints about my visit. At my gran’s house I always got seconds, which none of the other kids got. My grandmother would give me the pot and say, “Finish it.” If you didn’t want to wash the dishes, you called Trevor. They called me the rubbish bin of the family. I ate and ate and ate.

I was hyperactive, too. I craved constant stimulation and activity. When I walked down the sidewalk as a toddler, if you didn’t have my arm in a death grip, I was off, running full-speed toward the traffic. I loved to be chased. I thought it was a game. The old grannies my mom hired to look after me while she was at work? I would leave them in tears. My mom would come home and they’d be crying. “I quit. I can’t do this. Your son is a tyrant.” It was the same with my schoolteachers, with Sunday school teachers. If you weren’t engaging me, you were in trouble. I wasn’t a shit to people. I wasn’t whiny and spoiled. I had good manners. I was just high-energy and knew what I wanted to do.

My mom used to take me to the park so she could run me to death to burn off the energy. She’d take a Frisbee and throw it, and I’d run and catch it and bring it back. Over and over and over. Sometimes she’d throw a tennis ball. Black people’s dogs don’t play fetch; you don’t throw anything to a black person’s dog unless it’s food. So it was only when I started spending

time in parks with white people and their pets that I realized my mom was training me like a dog.

Anytime my extra energy wasn't burned off, it would find its way into general naughtiness and misbehavior. I prided myself on being the ultimate prankster. Every teacher at school used overhead projectors to put their notes up on the wall during class. One day I went around and took the magnifying glass out of every projector in every classroom. Another time I emptied a fire extinguisher into the school piano, because I knew we were going to have a performance at assembly the next day. The pianist sat down and played the first note and, foomp!, all this foam exploded out of the piano.

The two things I loved most were fire and knives. I was endlessly fascinated by them. Knives were just cool. I collected them from pawnshops and garage sales: flick knives, butterfly knives, the Rambo knife, the Crocodile Dundee knife. Fire was the ultimate, though. I loved fire and I especially loved fireworks. We celebrated Guy Fawkes Day in November, and every year my mom would buy us a ton of fireworks, like a mini-arsenal. I realized that I could take the gunpowder out of all the fireworks and create one massive firework of my own. One afternoon I was doing precisely that, goofing around with my cousin and filling an empty plant pot with a huge pile of gunpowder, when I got distracted by some Black Cat firecrackers. The cool thing you could do with a Black Cat was, instead of lighting it to make it explode, you could break it in half and light it and it would turn into a mini-flamethrower. I stopped midway through building my gunpowder pile to play with the Black Cats and somehow dropped a match into the pile. The whole thing exploded, throwing a massive ball of flame up in my face. Mlungisi screamed, and my mom came running into the yard in a panic.

“What happened?!”

I played it cool, even though I could still feel the heat of the fireball on my face. “Oh, nothing. Nothing happened.”

“Were you playing with fire?!”

“No.”

She shook her head. “You know what? I would beat you, but Jesus has already exposed your lies.”

“Huh?”

“Go to the bathroom and look at yourself.”

I went to the toilet and looked in the mirror. My eyebrows were gone and the front inch or so of my hair was completely burned off.

From an adult's point of view, I was destructive and out of control, but as a child I didn't think of it that way. I never wanted to destroy. I wanted to create. I wasn't burning my eyebrows. I was creating fire. I wasn't breaking overhead projectors. I was creating chaos, to see how people reacted.

And I couldn't help it. There's a condition kids suffer from, a compulsive disorder that makes them do things they themselves don't understand. You can tell a child, "Whatever you do, don't draw on the wall. You can draw on this paper. You can draw in this book. You can draw on any surface you want. But do not draw or write or color on the wall." The child will look you dead in the eye and say, "Got it." Ten minutes later the child is drawing on the wall. You start screaming. "Why the hell are you drawing on the wall?!" The child looks at you, and he genuinely has no idea why he drew on the wall. As a kid, I remember having that feeling all the time. Every time I got punished, as my mom was whooping my ass, I'd be thinking, *Why did I just do that? I knew not to do that. She told me not to do that.* Then once the hiding was over I'd say to myself, *I'm going to be so good from here on. I'm never ever going to do a bad thing in my life ever ever ever ever ever—and to remember not to do anything bad, let me write something on the wall to remind myself...*and then I would pick up a crayon and get straight back into it, and I never understood why.

My relationship with my mom was like the relationship between a cop and a criminal in the movies—the relentless detective and the devious mastermind she's determined to catch. They're bitter rivals, but, damn, they respect the hell out of each other, and somehow they even grow to like each other. Sometimes my mom would catch me, but she was usually one step behind, and she was always giving me the eye. *Someday, kid. Someday I'm going to catch you and put you away for the rest of your life. Then I would give her a nod in return. Have a good evening, Officer.* That was my whole childhood.

My mom was forever trying to rein me in. Over the years, her tactics grew more and more sophisticated. Where I had youth and energy on my side, she had cunning, and she figured out different ways to keep me in line. One Sunday we were at the shops and there was a big display of toffee apples. I loved toffee apples, and I kept nagging her the whole way through the shop. "Please can I have a toffee apple? Please can I have a toffee apple? Please can I have a toffee apple? Please can I have a toffee apple?"

Finally, once we had our groceries and my mom was heading to the front to pay, I succeeded in wearing her down. "Fine," she said. "Go and get a toffee apple." I ran, got a toffee apple, came back, and put it on the counter at the checkout.

“Add this toffee apple, please,” I said.

The cashier looked at me skeptically. “Wait your turn, boy. I’m still helping this lady.”

“No,” I said. “She’s buying it for me.”

My mother turned to me. “Who’s buying it for you?”

“You’re buying it for me.”

“No, no. Why doesn’t your mother buy it for you?”

“What? My mother? You are my mother.”

“I’m your mother? No, I’m not your mother. Where’s your mother?”

I was so confused. “*You’re* my mother.”

The cashier looked at her, looked back at me, looked at her again. She shrugged, like, *I have no idea what that kid’s talking about*. Then she looked at me like she’d never seen me before in her life.

“Are you lost, little boy? Where’s your mother?”

“Yeah,” the cashier said. “Where’s your mother?”

I pointed at my mother. “She’s my mother.”

“What? She can’t be your mother, boy. She’s black. Can’t you see?”

My mom shook her head. “Poor little colored boy lost his mother. What a shame.”

I panicked. Was I crazy? Is she not my mother? I started bawling. “*You’re* my mother. *You’re* my mother. *She’s* my mother. *She’s* my mother.”

She shrugged again. “So sad. I hope he finds his mother.”

The cashier nodded. She paid him, took our groceries, and walked out of the shop. I dropped the toffee apple, ran out behind her in tears, and caught up to her at the car. She turned around, laughing hysterically, like she’d really got me good.

“Why are you crying?” she asked.

“Because you said you weren’t my mother. Why did you say you weren’t my mother?”

“Because you wouldn’t shut up about the toffee apple. Now get in the car. Let’s go.”

By the time I was seven or eight, I was too smart to be tricked, so she changed tactics. Our life turned into a courtroom drama with two lawyers constantly debating over loopholes and technicalities. My mom was smart and had a sharp tongue, but I was quicker in an argument. She’d get flustered because she couldn’t keep up. So she started writing me letters. That way she could make her points and there could be no verbal sparring back and forth. If I had chores to do, I’d come home to find an envelope slipped under the door, like from the landlord.

Dear Trevor,

“Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.”

—Colossians 3:20

There are certain things I expect from you as my child and as a young man. You need to clean your room. You need to keep the house clean. You need to look after your school uniform. Please, my child, I ask you. Respect my rules so that I may also respect you. I ask you now, please go and do the dishes and do the weeds in the garden.

Yours sincerely,

Mom

I would do my chores, and if I had anything to say I would write back. Because my mom was a secretary and I spent hours at her office every day after school, I'd learned a great deal about business correspondence. I was extremely proud of my letter-writing abilities.

To Whom It May Concern:

Dear Mom,

I have received your correspondence earlier. I am delighted to say that I am ahead of schedule on the dishes and I will continue to wash them in an hour or so. Please note that the garden is wet and so I cannot do the weeds at this time, but please be assured this task will be completed by the end of the weekend. Also, I completely agree with what you are saying with regard to my respect levels and I will maintain my room to a satisfactory standard.

Yours sincerely,

Trevor

Those were the polite letters. If we were having a real, full-on argument or if I'd gotten in trouble at school, I'd find more accusatory [redacted] waiting for me when I got home.

Dear Trevor,

“Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline will remove it far from him.”

—Proverbs 22:15

Your school marks this term have been very disappointing, and your behavior in class continues to be disruptive and disrespectful. It is clear from your actions that you do not respect me. You do not respect your teachers. Learn to respect the women in your life. The way you treat me and the way you treat your teachers will be the way you treat other women in the world. Learn to buck that trend now and you will be a better man because of it. Because of your behavior I am grounding you for one week. There will be no television and no videogames.

Yours sincerely,  
Mom

I, of course, would find this punishment completely unfair. I'd take the letter and confront her.

"Can I speak to you about this?"

"No. If you want to reply, you have to write a letter."

I'd go to my room, get out my pen and paper, sit at my little desk, and go after her arguments one by one.

To Whom It May Concern:  
Dear Mom,

First of all, this has been a particularly tough time in school, and for you to say that my marks are bad is extremely unfair, especially considering the fact that you yourself were not very good in school and I am, after all, a product of yours, and so in part you are to blame because if you were not good in school, why would I be good in school because genetically we are the same. Gran always talks about how naughty you were, so obviously my naughtiness comes from you, so I don't think it is right or just for you to say any of this.

Yours sincerely,  
Trevor

I'd bring her the letter and stand there while she read it. Invariably she'd tear it up and throw it in the dustbin. "Rubbish! This is rubbish!" Then she'd start to launch into me and I'd say, "Ah-ah-ah. No. You have to write a letter." Then I'd go to my room and wait for her reply. This sometimes went back and forth for days.

The letter writing was for minor disputes. For major infractions, my mom went with the ass-whooping. Like most black South African parents, when it came to discipline my mom was old school. If I pushed her too far, she'd go for the belt or switch. That's just how it was in those days. Pretty much all of my friends had it the same.

My mom would have given me proper sit-down hidings if I'd given her the opportunity, but she could never catch me. My gran called me "Springbok," after the second-fastest land mammal on earth, the deer that the cheetah hunts. My mom had to become a guerrilla fighter. She got her licks in where she could, her belt or maybe a shoe, administered on the fly.

One thing I respected about my mom was that she never left me in any doubt as to why I was receiving the hiding. It wasn't rage or anger. It was discipline from a place of love. My mom was on her own with a crazy child. I destroyed pianos. I shat on floors. I would screw up, she'd beat the shit out of me and give me time to cry, and then she'd pop back into my room with a big smile and go, "Are you ready for dinner? We need to hurry and eat if we want to watch *Rescue 911*. Are you coming?"

"What? What kind of psychopath are you? You just beat me!"

"Yes. Because you did something wrong. It doesn't mean I don't love you anymore."

"What?"

"Look, did you or did you not do something wrong?"

"I did."

"And then? I hit you. And now that's over. So why sit there and cry? It's time for *Rescue 911*. William Shatner is waiting. Are you coming or not?"