On 29 October 1970 in Boksburg to the east of Johannesburg, South

Africa, I was born and not left to die but to make it good, like most

babies that are brought into this world.

On the same day, Nelson Mandela was already beginning his

ninth year in prison. In prison since 1962, and then convicted for

treason after the Rivonia Trial in 1964, he was sentenced to life

imprisonment. He and other political prisoners were incarcerated

on Robben Island, a desolate island off the coast of Cape Town, for

opposing apartheid.

At the time my father worked at a construction company and my

mother was a teacher. They were very poor. My only sibling, my

brother Anton, was three years old when I was born. Because our

parents were white, we were born to legal privilege. That was the

way it was in South Africa in 1970. Even though my parents’ families

shared the same holiday destination every December, my parents

only met in Boksburg once my mother was studying to become a

teacher and my father was working in the postal service.

My grandfather’s family originated from French Huguenots who

fled the south of France during the 1680s to escape the persecution

of Protestants by the Catholic authorities. The La Grange family

originated from a small town called Cabrières in the region of

Avignon;

a place I discovered and visited twice in the decades after

my birth as a result of working for Nelson Mandela.

My father was one of two siblings. Their parents lived in Mosselbay,

a coastal town along the picturesque Garden Route in the

Cape Province. My grandmother’s sister was the first qualified

female pharmacist in South Africa and up to this day the Scholtz

family own and run a reputable pharmacy in the town of Willowmore

in the Eastern Cape. She was therefore quite an impressive

woman and someone we automatically looked up to as a result of

her unique achievement.

I was also very fond of my dad’s father. His name was Anthony

Michael but we just called him ‘Oupa Mike’ (Grandpa Mike). He

used to visit us a few times a year and then stay with us for a few

weeks. He smoked a pipe and the smell of smoke irritated us. He

would sit on one particular chair and constantly wipe his hand on

the arm rest. His skin was old and cracked and the tobacco from

stuffing his pipe stuck in those cracks. When he left our home the

armrest was black, much to my mother’s irritation, but nobody ever

said he couldn’t smoke in the house.

My mother was the eldest of three siblings from the Strydom family.

The only famous family with that surname was that of J. G.

Strijdom (also sometimes spelt Strydom), the sixth Prime Minister of

South Africa who served between 1954 and 1958. He was succeeded by

the ‘Father of Apartheid’, H. F. Verwoerd. When I learned as a child

about a Strijdom being Prime Minister, I convinced myself that we

were somehow related even though no real connection exists.

My mother’s father died in a motorcycle accident when my

mother was only twelve years of age. I often asked my mother

whether she recalled the night they received the news about her

father’s death. She has mostly avoided talking about it, but has said

that she recalled been woken up by someone knocking on their

front door and then hearing my grandmother crying hysterically.

My grandmother had few options about the upbringing of her

children. She had a clerical job at the South African Railways and it

was financially impossible for her to raise three small children by

herself.

She decided to send my mother, being the eldest, to an orphanage.

The children’s home was in Cape Town, which is why my

mother still detests the city. For her, it stinks of abandonment.

Ma only saw her siblings and my grandmother once a year during

the December holidays. Both the La Grange and Strydom families

camped in the same area close to Mosselbay, called Hartenbos, during

the December holidays, but they never knew about the other’s

existence.

My mother’s childhood memories are limited to suffering, neglect,

sadness. The world was suffering the consequences of the

Second World War, slowly recovering from the economic recession,

and my mother, even as an Afrikaans child in the 1940s in South

Africa, felt those consequences through poverty. I greatly admire

her for not holding a grudge against my grandmother, whatever the

circumstances.

Grandma Tilly, my mother’s mother, was part of our everyday

life, even though she had given up my mother as a child. She lived

close to us and I would often visit her on my way from primary

school, as she conveniently lived halfway between our house and

the school. Before she moved closer to us, Grandma Tilly lived

opposite the Union Buildings. Sitting on the hill overlooking the

city of Pretoria, the administrative capital of South Africa, the

Union Buildings were built by Herbert Baker and were the seat of

the apartheid government. Imposing, monumental and beautiful –

for my family, it was like living across from the White House.

On Sundays the La Granges and the Strydoms, my uncle’s family,

would all visit my gran in her apartment for lunch and then go for

a walk on the manicured lawns of the Union Buildings. The Union

Buildings represented ultimate authority and we walked up the

steps with great respect. My cousins, brother and I would play on

the grounds, rolling down the sloping lawn, laughing all the time.

We were happy children growing up in apartheid South Africa.

Ours was a typical privileged white family, benefiting from apartheid

through good education, access to basic services and a sense of

entitlement to the land and its resources. Apartheid was our regime’s

political solution to enforce segregation and the separation of races,

classes and cultures.

Instituted by the Afrikaner leaders in the late 1950s, the then Prime

Minister, Hendrik Verwoerd, called it ‘policy’. ‘Our policy is one of

good neighbourliness’, implying that the Afrikaner cared for all

racial groups in South Africa. But the reality was that apartheid was

a way of ensuring that Afrikaners benefited from the economy,

opportunities and wealth of the country’s natural resources, at the

expense of others. By the mid 1970s the apartheid government had created a racist

state based on decisions taken in the Union Buildings. Black and

white people were separated, not allowed to marry, befriend, have

sex together or to live in the same cities. These were the so‑called

Group Areas Act provisions in South Africa, an attempt to prevent

people from freely moving around and living lives within the same

boundaries. Black people couldn’t ride in the same buses or swim in

the same sea as whites. Due to its apartheid policies, South Africa

was suspended from participating in the business of the United

Nations in 1974, and followed by a resolution passed in 1977 a mandatory

arms embargo was imposed against us. However, the United

States, Britain and France opposed the expulsion of South Africa

from the UN despite several resolutions calling for it.

Even though my country was an international pariah, we kept on

playing and laughing at the seat of government. This was because

my people were protected. Protected from men like Nelson Mandela.

It was people like him – black and determined to overthrow

the government, challenging white superiority – who we feared.

Neither of my parents were politicians or worked for the government.

But we supported the regime. We were, I suppose, racists. We

epitomized the typical Afrikaner middle-class

family at the time: law-abiding citizens, cheerleaders for whatever the church and government dictated. Our respect for authority and the ties to the Dutch

Reformed Church superseded common sense. Like any other Afrikaans

family, we attended church services on Sunday morning without

fail and participated in all related activities to exhibit our model

citizenry. So apartheid was in our home. We lived by segregation. It was

all acceptable and unquestionable, not only because the National

Party government in power dictated it but also because our church

endorsed it. Black people were anyone who wasn’t white. Coloured and

Indian people were black in our eyes too. ‘Coloured people’, now

referred to as ‘brown’ people, originated

from different groups, just

like the Afrikaners, but some of their forefathers were Qash-skinned.

Therefore they were regarded as ‘black’ in South Africa.

The white Afrikaner has a mixed genealogy that includes Dutch,

French, German and British blood. Although unthinkable at the

time, it has emerged in modern history and studies that almost all

white Afrikaner people have DNA that can be traced to black and

brown ancestry in South Africa – facts not all white Afrikaners easily

accept. At the time of apartheid you didn’t even contemplate anything but

simply did it. I knew that all black people were required to carry a pass

book and they had to show their pass books randomly to police that

stopped them. I didn’t know that they were only allowed to move in

areas that their passes allowed them to move in, and if they didn’t

have a pass for a specific area they would be arrested for transgression

of the pass act and thrown into jail, before being deported to their

own area. If you had a pass for Johannesburg, you couldn’t move in

Pretoria – two cities barely thirty miles apart. It was the government’s

way of controlling black people’s movements.

According to our church, we were right. We did the ‘right’ thing.

And yes it was right, as in direction to the right. The utmost

conservatism. Like most white families we had a black live‑in

domestic worker. Her name was Jogabeth. Reminiscing about those days one cannot

help but come to the realization that most white children of my age

were brought up by black people. They were not only domestic

workers but surrogate mothers. As a child Jogabeth was part of our

family to a certain extent, and within limits – apartheid limits. She

stayed in a back room. She had a toilet but no bath or shower. She

had a separate cup and cutlery and was not allowed to use ‘ours’. I

cannot recall that my parents ever told her she was not allowed to

use anything of ours but she knew and we knew. It was unspoken.

Yet, Jogabeth was my lifeline. Touching a black person was taboo.

Apart from the fact that white people were considered superior to black people, we were

brought up to believe that they were not as clean as we were, they

apparently smelled different and the texture of their hair was different

to ours. You would never dream of touching a black person’s

hair or face. It was just unthinkable. Yet Jogabeth carried me on her

back when I was a toddler. Although I never would have touched

her hair, her hands, arms and her bosom comforted me whenever I

needed it. Because she brought us children up, in our eyes she wasn’t

as black as other blacks. She posed no threat to us and she served us

and therefore she was more acceptable to us than other black

people. I remember on many occasions being bullied by my brother and

how Jogabeth had to comfort me after losing the battle. She was my

safe house and I knew that, as long as I was in her care, I was protected

from my big brother’s bullying. And then during such times,

I found comfort in her arms, close to her chest.

When I was twelve years old and my father was employed by the

South African Breweries, eventually working his way up to become

logistics manager, political unrest against apartheid played a role in

my life for the first time. The head offices of the SAB were situated

in the Poyntons Building in Church Street, Pretoria. On Friday,

20 May 1983 my dad was scheduled to fly to Cape Town to attend to

business there. Just before 4 p.m. a bomb blast shook the entire city

of Pretoria in its core. The story broke on the news immediately

and it was reported that the car bomb exploded right in front of the

Poyntons Building. When news was received my mother called my dad’s office, but

there was no response. She called the airport to check whether he

was on the flight at around 6 p.m. but the airport authorities refused

to release information on passengers, as they always do. We couldn’t

find anyone that could confirm whether my dad was still in the

building at the time of the explosion, whether he had safely left by

the time of the explosion or whether he possibly walked past or

drove out of the parking garage at the time of the explosion. He

often attended business luncheons at restaurants in the surrounding

areas of his head office and we feared for the worst. It was only at

about 9 p.m. that night, when he arrived at his hotel in Cape Town,

that he called to inform us that he was safe. It was the longest five

hours of my life. We were relieved that he was unharmed. I didn’t

ask why resistance to apartheid would be so strong, or take such

violent forms. The violence only served to strengthen my belief in

apartheid, the inherent difference between black and white.

Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the opposition African National

Congress’s military wing, accepted responsibility for the bomb in

which 19 people were killed – 8 black people and 11 white people – and

more than 217 were injured. The Church Street bomb exploded at

the height of rush hour. The two men involved in planning and

executing the bombing were also killed, as the bomb was detonated

by accident too soon. Umkhonto we Sizwe, ‘Spear of the Nation’, was established in

1961 after Nelson Mandela and other founding members of MK

decided that violence in South Africa was becoming the only way to

respond to the violence exercised by the apartheid government.

Since the government resorted to violent means in fighting the

ANC and keeping black people oppressed under apartheid laws,

MK was the ANC’s response to such violence. In Nelson Mandela’s

speech during the closing moments of the Rivonia Trial in 1964,

when he was charged with acts of terrorism and after which he and

others were sentenced to life imprisonment, he noted about MK: ‘It

would be unrealistic and wrong for African leaders to continue

preaching peace and non-violence at a time when the government

met our peaceful demands with force.’ Having gone to Ethiopia and Morocco in 1962 to receive military training and to secure support for MK, Mr Mandela was prepared to

resort to violence. However, I am not sure whether he knew while

he was imprisoned what ANC cadres were doing outside and

whether those imprisoned were consulted about such acts of violence.

In 1983 Oliver Tambo was President of the ANC; Nelson

Mandela was already sixty-five years of age, spending his twentieth

year imprisoned, and communication was difficult with prisoners.

I subsequently asked him whether he was aware of the Church Street

bombing and he said that they had been briefed after the incident.

The ANC knew it needed to force the hand of the racist regime.

To do that they would have to turn to violence. The government

was not prepared to abolish apartheid or improve the living conditions

of black people and they would rather fight the black force

with violence. The ANC’s response was violence. They did that by

targeting strategic installations, crucial to the state. The Poytons

Building was strategic because the South African Air Force Headquarters

was situated in the same building.

I was generally oblivious to what was happening in the country,

the poverty of blacks and the violence, but I knew that we lived in

separate cocoons and that we were fighting one another in a bitter

battle because we were not able to co‑exist.

It was pressed upon us instinctively, because of the way we lived, that when approached by

a black person, you turned and walked the other way. You didn’t make

conversation and you feared them. They were not our friends. I was

quite happy with my life as it was and knew that we were locking

doors and windows from an early age out of fear that black people

might attack us at night. It never crossed my mind that we could be

harmed by white people too. It was always ‘black’ people. I didn’t

ask why they might attack us, or who they were, or what their lives

were like. I only knew that they were dangerous.

On Sundays we solemnly prayed in church for the men defending

our borders. It was the right thing to do because everybody else did

it. Well, all the other whites in my community. I didn’t know which

border but I knew they were fighting black people. My knowledge

was limited to whites protecting the border from infiltration by

more black people. How strange that then one didn’t ask the question,

which black people? Were we protecting our borders from

infiltration by more black people or were we protecting our borders

from other military forces in the region infiltrating South Africa to

support the ANC? You were told just this: we are fighting black

communist people. I was brought up to believe that all black people

were communists and atheists. Yet on Sundays black people gathered

in small groups in open spaces, holding church services. I

disregarded seeing that and cannot remember that the contradiction

to what I was brought up to believe ever bothered me. As a

child it is easy to follow when you grow up in an environment that

is safe. Perhaps if I had been oppressed, didn’t have access to a

decent school, a proper house, electricity and water, I would have

asked different questions, and my brain would have developed into

being more inquisitive about injustice at an early age. In any case it

didn’t. Today I also realize that the community you are brought up in

chooses to live in a particular way. The people around you, grown‑up

adult people, decide what is socially acceptable and what is not. You

live that life not realizing that there is a life beyond: issues, policies,

world events and tendencies that influence your world. When you

live in comfort you don’t ask questions, and there was no need for

me to question what was happening beyond the walls of our house.

No person is born a racist. You become a racist by influences around

you. And I had become a racist by the time I was thirteen years old.

By that calculation I should never have become Nelson Mandela’s

longest-serving

assistant. But I did.