

The Karma of Violence

Glen Retief

When I was twelve years old and skinny as a grasslands cheetah, my parents sent me away to boarding-school. They had no choice in the matter. We lived in a staff village in a game park more than an hour away from the nearest secondary school, so boarding-school was both an unavoidable and unremarkable rite of passage for all of those entering Standard Six (eighth grade). One baking hot, glaring Monday afternoon in January 1983, the day before the start of the school year, they drove me to Nelspruit, a shady farming town on the main road between Johannesburg and Mozambique. Here, they dropped me at a complex of red brick buildings in a newly-built first-floor dormitory still smelling of concrete dust, builders' tape and paint, and lined with metal lockers and identical blue-and-white-quilted beds.

It didn't take me very long to get into trouble at my new school. That very first afternoon, after the parents had left, all of us had to stand, according to boarding-school tradition, in the downstairs showers and wait for our two seventeen-year-old dormitory prefects to finish soaping and rinsing themselves. After a minute or two one of them, a skinny blond muscular boy named John, with bright red acne all over his face, announced an initiation ritual which involved dropping our towels, placing our hands on our heads, and singing an athletics song while jumping up and down in the nude. I was fascinated by his cock, which was tumescent from watching us, and by his tuft of bright blond pubic hair, which was the first pubic hair of any color I'd seen in my life. At some point he caught me looking at his groin.

"You," he said, beckoning me to come to the front.

He asked my name, then told me to bend over. From somewhere he produced a cricket bat. He proceeded to give me six hard strokes on my bum. I remember that he put tremendous force into them, swinging back on his strokes so that the cracks echoed through that stark concrete bathroom. I also recall that the burning on my buttocks was absolutely extraordinary, a fierce, searing agony that caused my throat to harden and my eyes to mist up. I was terrified. Bile rose

in my mouth. It was tough to breathe.

"Let that be a lesson to you, Standard Six," he said when he was finished. "We are fighting a war in this country, and there isn't any room here for queers and weaklings." He actually used those words—*queers*; *weaklings*. After my whipping I had to ask Martin, the skinny freckled boy who slept in the bed opposite mine, to explain to me what queers were; when he told me there were men in the world who lived together and had intercourse, at first I refused to believe him.

"It's true," Martin said, "and John thinks you're one." And so many other boys all agreed that Martin was right, that in the end I had to bow to their superior numbers.

Unfortunately, that was just the beginning of it. Over the next ten months, and especially during the first three of them, when John lived in the Standard Six dormitory with us, I, along with to varying extents the other Standard Sixes in the dormitory, would, in the name of "initiation" face an avalanche of sexual violence and torture. I would be given hidings with a cricket bat for walking past candy wrappers lying on the floor or not greeting a matric (twelfth-grader) energetically enough when I saw him. I would receive electric shocks to my genitalia and be beaten with pillowslips full of athletics spikes; for shits and laughs, I would be made to pretend that my penis was a drill bit and I had to plow through the concrete floor into the building foundations. I would have my food and snacks confiscated from me; on an afternoon when the temperature in the shade was more than a hundred degrees, I would be confined to my bed under a pile of blankets, with the rest of the Standard Sixes forbidden from bringing me water. By the end of that calendar year—easily the worst year of my life to date, and certainly my closest brush with the kind of oppression that society usually meets out to those on its furthest margins—I would be gaunt and skeletal as a stray dog; so petrified, fragile and shell-shocked that I would spend afternoons hidden away in the toilets, lying with my head on my hands and listening to the water drip into the septic tank; and touched, for the first time in my life, with a kind of existential sadness

that has never quite left me, a sense that something was fundamentally out-of-kilter both with myself and the larger world, and that whatever this thing was, it wouldn't be easy to restore to balance again or put right.

These memories are hard to summon up in the daylight. They lurk, somewhere in the shadows of my mind, as much a part of me as the freckles on my arms or the oval-shaped birthmark on my left thigh, but in some mysterious way they also seem separate from me, disassociated film clippings of things that happened to someone else. On rose-tinted South Florida mornings, when I drive to the private high school where I teach, and I see the tranquil school buildings surrounded by the banyans and poinsettias, the lawns and sports fields and neat little wooden benches where the students sit at break and eat their sandwiches, the thought that crosses my mind is: *None of that was real. All of that porn-flick, Abu Ghraib-style stuff was just a bad dream.*

In my daily sequence of high school English classes, there is little to remind me of my past. At this school, which is attended mostly by the ultra-wealthy sons and daughters of investment bankers and mogul land developers, a strict anti-bullying policy makes even the slightest suggestion of physical violence or intimidation punishable by detention, suspension, or expulsion. All over campus, rectangular brass and steel plaques remind students of their contractual obligation to report all instances of hostile teasing to the administration. According to my tenth and eleventh graders, students here settle their differences either through conversation, or through threats, humorous or actual, to contact their fathers' hot-shot lawyers. "If one student really bullied another here, there'd be a lawsuit before you could dial 911," they tell me, and I believe them, these fresh-faced, optimistic ruling-class denizens of the world's richest and most powerful country.

There are times, watching my students, that I pity them for living such sheltered lives. The gleaming SUVs bringing them to school seem obscenely far from the barefoot African children who trudged to school near where I grew up. ("Don't forget how much harder the black people have it," the teachers said whenever we complained about our own rough boarding school, and of course, in a sense they were right). The case management meetings called for every flunked test or irritable outburst by a student in Math class, where a thoughtful, sympathetic school counselor

suggests anger management strategies or procrastination-beating mental tricks—these seem from a different universe than our mock hangings in school bathrooms, where once my friend Andre involuntarily stained the wood of an improvised gallows with his urine. ("Disgusting! Phew!" said the seniors when he did this, and they, too, were in a sense correct).

I look at my American students in their polo shirts, wedged between their counselors, homeroom advisors, parents, teachers, and administrators, and I think: *I'm happy you're so spoiled, even though you don't have a clue.*

But then, after the school day, superciliousness gives way to envy—a blind rage at them and their lucky country, accompanying me on the I-95 highway past the billboards and the palm trees. This, in turn, later decomposes in its constituent elements: a naked pain as I sit in front of the television, and unadulterated abandonment plaguing me as I try to do my grading. A hole throbbing in my chest, right above my diaphragm. A cold terror in my hands, spreading over my body.

And I ask myself yet again: why was there no one? Why did no teacher take the trouble to notice what was happening, all of those years ago, in bathrooms with doors left unlocked and open, in dormitories with glass windows open to the clouds and birds? Why did no one snap Abu Ghraib-style pictures of *our* grinning and jaunty tormentors—cause a local scandal? At that year's final honors assembly, when John received the award for community service and moral leadership for making sandwiches for the neighboring old age home—everyone in the audience rising to applaud, John standing in the amber-colored spotlight, smiling his aw-shucks grin, holding up his trophy for the school photographer—why did no one heckle him from the back rows?

A memory: late afternoon, perhaps a week or so after the beating in the shower room. The sun is a luminous blood-red, the color of the hostel bricks. I stand at a wooden door, the entrance to the apartment of the teacher-on-duty. The teacher answers it, a ruddy-faced man with ginger hair and thick, stocky arms full of blonde hairs. I try to explain to him that John has been beating me several times a day ever since I arrived, for everything from walking past an empty Coke bottle left on the landing to not folding the corners of my bed hospital-style. In my mouth these jumbled complaints transmute into a mangled story about how I need to cover

my textbooks and John won't let me do this during study hall because he wants all the Standard Sixes to go to a dance the next evening. Sometime during this jeremiad I begin to sob, and ask if I can call my parents from his phone. The teacher touches me on the arm, firmly but not unkindly.

"You tell John I say he needs to let you cover your textbooks," he says. "Be strong now. You'll be okay, I promise you." Why does he never mention this incident to me again?

Or here is another one: another late afternoon, just before sunset, the quality of light heavy-red and golden. I am in my parents' car driving back to the game reserve, the first weekend I have been permitted to go back home—along with the other boarders, I am required to stay in the hostel and cheer at sports events when the school is playing one of our neighbors. I have contacted my parents several times since the abuse began, mostly from my aunt's office in the newsroom of a community newspaper across the street: I have been stealing away, unseen, after lunch, and spending entire afternoons sitting on piles of phone books and stacks of returned tabloids. My father shifts the vehicle into third gear to go up a hill. Then he sighs, a sigh deeper than any I have heard him issue before, a moan that seems pregnant with a grief that is far beyond my twelve-year-old comprehension.

"The thing is, it's not *true*, Glen," he says. "I *know* it isn't. You're *not* a sissy or a nancy boy, or another of the other things they're calling you. This is what makes this all so unfair." Perhaps the tremble that starts on his lip also indicates that he is angry with them; his shoulders and neck tense up. Is he also annoyed at me?

He says: "Some of these young guys just act like walking penises." I don't understand what he means. He says: "This does happen to everyone, you know." He never, to my recollection, articulates the sentiment that in retrospect I so long to hear from him, the words that will touch my inner ache: *The fact that this is happening is a moral abomination, and I will do everything, I mean everything, my son, to protect you from it.*

Or here, at last, is the most painful memory. It is late one afternoon at school—I think the afternoon after John made me lie under a pile of blankets. Somehow I have made my way to the top of the school, to the fourth storey of the building we called the East Wing, with the view over rolling green hills covered with citrus orchards and the

ribbon of tarred road leading to Johannesburg. I can see the little toy houses where my grandparents live, on an orange farm ten minutes' drive away: these are the grandparents whom I have begged my parents to let me live with, but they have refused. I lean over the railing, the top half of my body precipitously hanging above the hard ground. Death's release exerts a strong attraction. I pray: "Please, if I jump now, Lord Jesus, send your angels and carry me over there, to Granny and Grandpa, and make it so that I don't have to come back here."

But there are no angels, at least none that I believe in enough to risk my fate. I do not jump.

A significant part of my adult life has been spent trying to come to terms with these experiences. "I am a survivor of torture," I have said to myself, by way of trying to force myself to take my own victimization seriously. But the words *survivor* and *torture* stick in the throat like fruit pits; they clang hollow and untrue, sound to me like self-pity and dramatization. I long to spit them away from me—even though, reading through the incidents listed in reports by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International it is hard to see how the actions of John and his friends back in 1983 could not at some level have qualified as war crimes.

Denial is complex and multi-faceted, universal, pernicious. To confront it means not just to challenge the multiple lies and half-truths embedded in the self, but also to face loved-ones and personal anchors, family and friends, the communities that provide structure and identity.

Until age twenty-four, when I first arrived in New York City as an immigrant and expatriate, I truly had no idea there was even anything strange in the story of my early adolescence. All of my life I had simply thought of myself as unlucky for having been hit "harder" than the average Standard Six, because of being visibly homosexual. Being stripped naked, though, and forced to fuck a pillow slip lined with menthol muscle relaxant; being punched and clobbered and called names; dealing with jokes and high jinks, a little telephone-crank cock-shock machine here and some humorous armpit hair-burning over there: all of this I took for granted as a regular part of growing up. When, after three months of John's depredations, my parents managed to persuade the school authorities to transfer him to another passage—an action they took without telling me, for fear I would give away the secret and become more of a target—

the abuses continued, albeit at a reduced intensity, and in fact they persisted throughout high school. My father was not wrong in telling me these things happened to “everyone.” A 2001 report of the South African Human Rights Commission, authorized by the new democratic parliament, found that such abuses were widespread and accepted in schools “within an institutional culture of authoritarianism and bullying.”¹

It took several years, and the utterly anguished, horrified expressions on the faces of friends of several different nationalities—American, Swiss, Spanish, Brazilian and Chinese—for me to realize that, say, having one’s head shoved in a tiny wooden mailbox while being caned with a three-foot hockey stick was not a universal coming-of-age ritual. Even then, I was reluctant to acknowledge that my childhood wasn’t “normal,” “happy” and “safe.” It is no exaggeration to state that it is those moments sitting around in Brooklyn brownstone apartments watching faces crumple into utter bewilderment at the descriptions of my childhood and adolescence that I felt the first serious stirrings to provide a fiction and nonfiction of witness; to share with the wider world my story and its implications.

In talking to my family over the years, and in sharing my published memoirs and personal essays, it has been hard to share this newfound international perspective. My parents tend to be sympathetic, yet guarded. “We did the best we can,” says my father. “In those days, that’s the way things were done.” It is all but impossible to communicate frankly with my former teachers who still live and work in the town where I grew up. Recently, when I suggested to one of my old Math instructors that school discipline may have been cruel in the old days, she proceeded to regale me with a diatribe about how, under democracy, academic standards have collapsed and the blacks have brought drugs, laziness, and knife fights into previous citadels of order. “Yours was the last generation,” she tells me, “to be educated in safety.”

At the political level, the denial of the abuse of young white male preadolescents under apartheid is a glaring absence in the national discourse about reconciliation, healing, and the building of the so-called “rainbow nation.” Existing narratives of the apartheid era rely heavily on notions of white aggression and black victimhood. To some extent feminists have succeeded in adding to the mix concepts of

male belligerence and female injury. Entirely missing from this world view is any sense of white males themselves as dual victims and perpetrators, stuck in a perverse, topsy-turvy karma of oppression—not being subjected to the ills that they inflicted on others, as in the Hindu cosmology, but rather treating others the way they were once treated, and thus perpetuating the cycle *ad nauseum*.

And yet in the universe of apartheid, this is exactly what happened. At countless institutions like my boarding school, spread across the African veld like red-brick blisters, boys without hair on their bodies became, for a time, honorary black South Africans. As the years went by, these boys, with all the verve of understudies stepping into stage roles, went on to bully the juniors under them, shouting orders to polish shoes or make beds, walloping them in the kidneys when they took too long to bring back Coca-cola from the corner store. When the time came for these seventeen-year-olds to be conscripted into the South African Defence Force, the roles flipped once more. This time, they were made to do push-ups over mud puddles until their arms collapsed, or run miles with backpacks on their shoulders, or perhaps even have sexual intercourse with female prostitutes to prove their masculinity. According to at least one postapartheid human rights study, if they showed signs of gentleness or effeminacy they were made to endure punishments including electric shock treatment and having their genitalia rubbed with shoe polish and inspected by whole platoons.

In white male South African society, the final step on this ladder of suffering and oppression was to become a soldier or officer entrusted with the task of maintaining white supremacy. According to the report of Desmond Tutu’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, here there were few limits on the exercise of brute power. Herero and Ovambo women on the Namibian border were beaten and gang-raped. Captured guerilla fighters got fried alive on the engines of armored cars. At the higher levels of military command, white men who looked and spoke just like John and his friends gave orders for the engineering of civil wars and famines that would claim millions of lives. Like so many mad Kurtzes, many white men seemed to lose all sense of themselves in those days, to become intoxicated with power and cruelty, and to have no qualms about

¹ South African Human Rights Commission. “Report into Initiation Practices at Educational Institutions and a Preliminary Report on Cultural Initiations.” Cape Town: SAHRC, October 2001.

destroying individuals, families, and nations. By time it all came to an end, the damage done, both to South Africa and its neighbors—the child soldiers with their legs blown up; the families left abandoned and destitute—simply beggared the human imagination.

Perhaps I was either too gentle or too tough a soul to succumb to the karma of violence. Perhaps it was simply that as a gay man I was a natural misfit in my own society, with no hope, under apartheid, of ever being comfortable in the laager, the circle of wagons drawn against indigenous Africans. Perhaps, back in those humid summer days when John was standing over my bed, with his smell of Clearasil facewash and his ironed black boxer shorts, trying to plant in me the spiritual kernel of what he was—perhaps on one of those, another seed managed to blow into my soul, much as, even on the hottest afternoons in the dormitory, a breath of honeysuckle would come in through the open windows. Grace, divine or otherwise, is inevitably mysterious.

When I myself reached Standard Ten, I never participated in the torture of the younger boys. I never punched them full-force in the chest or struck them with canes and athletics spikes; I never seized them, thrust them up into corners, and threatened to bash out all the teeth in their mouths. But I cannot claim to be a hero. I never reported or spoke out against any abuse or bullying. I never looked at the juniors while they were being tormented, never offered them as much as a commiserating shake of the head. On one occasion, so as not to appear a weakling in front of my peers, I did make a Standard Seven in my passage bend over for being disrespectful to me, and I hit him as hard as I could with a cricket bat, until he begged me to stop. I remember that when I was done I threw up in the passage toilets.

I never joined the South African Defence Force. At age nineteen, a student at the University of Cape Town, I joined the End Conscription Campaign and declared that I was a conscientious objector, that I would not fight for white supremacy. Along with many thousands of white men of my generation, I decided simply to ignore the call-up papers, to not show up at one of those train or bus stations where we were supposed to shave our heads, heave our duffel bags onto our shoulders, and be transformed into killers. The penalties for refusing military service were six years' prison, if they caught you. By that time, though, the

laws had become virtually unenforceable.

I have said that the karma of violence was repetitious and unchanging, but that is not strictly true. By the time I reached matric, the so-called initiation rituals in my school were already markedly reduced in intensity, and soon after that, under the leadership of a new school principal, they were forbidden. After the transition to democracy in 1994, all forms of corporal punishment and bullying were outlawed. The rest of the story of the South African transformation is well-known. Today, the liveliest wars fought are on the soccer fields, cricket pitches, and rugby stadiums.

As I write these words, summer has once again descended on Miami. Days so scalding that when I leave the air conditioning it feels like I have stepped into a furnace give way to cool, fresh evenings lit up by thunderstorms. The poinciana trees are all in red, fiery bloom; my students are on summer vacation. Before leaving, one of my favorite students, who plans to one day become a memoirist herself, ran up to me early one morning and told me how she had not only managed, with the help of a peer counselor, to defuse a bullying situation between an older boy and a younger one, but that she had joined the local Amnesty International club, and would be working next year to secure the release of political prisoners in Guantanamo, Havana, Mexico, and the Middle East. She was so exuberant and happy; her arms wheeled as she talked about going to Washington, D.C.; her mouth opened wide as she laughed about the fun she was going to have in Chiapas. *You, too*, I thought, *are going to be a witness*. And this time, instead of provoking jealousy, her open, innocent face, so full of youthful happiness, gave me hope.