

The Wet Bag and Other Phantoms

Antjie Krog

"I stand before you – naked and humble. I have decided to stop apologizing for Apartheid and to tell the truth. With this I will betray my people and I will betray myself. But I have to tell the truth. I have made peace with God and the time has come to make peace with the people of KwaZulu-Natal. To make peace with myself. It is this audience which haunts me in the back of my head. Maybe among you are those whom I assaulted, whom I left behind for dead in the field."

Constable William Harrington testifies about the Seven Day War in the area around Pietermaritzburg in the early nineties, when 200 people died, hundreds of houses were burned down, and thousands of refugees were left homeless. He admits that he assaulted more than a thousand people during his short service period of two years and eight months in the police force. This works out to more than one person every day.

Harrington was 18 years old and had been out of the Police Training College for barely a week when he was sent to track down ANC combatants in the dark.

"Richard said I should stick close to him. I was so afraid. We entered an ANC/UDF area. Rick pointed out Dallies – he was fired at by the ANC the previous week. When we descended into a dark valley, whistling started 200 metres from us – it was echoed into the valley. 'They know we are here,' whispered Rick. I tried to run, but it was difficult – with the *haelgeweer* and belt around my waist, trying to prevent the flares and bullets from falling out of my pocket."

In the darkness they came across a group of men, down on their knees to keep out of sight, and signalling to one another by making clicking sounds with their tongues. The unit Harrington was in crouched down silently and crept closer, making the same clicking noises. Five metres from them someone suddenly shouted, "*Amapoyisa!*" ["The police!"] and everybody started to shoot in all directions.

"It was like a movie imprinted on my memory. Flares were fired, people tumbled as they were shot... it was like a herd in flight."

After this baptism Harrington learnt quickly. At night, disguised in balaclavas, his unit sowed destruction in ANC areas. They went from home to home, searched for weapons, demanded to see IFP membership cards. If the house was without one, it was burnt down. "I fired on any ANC house or group from my vehicle, I distributed weapons to IFP chiefs, I transported Inkatha members and ammunition. It was days of death and blood."

"It was my war, my personal war against the ANC. My superiors told me: 'You act as if you are a little God.' And they were right. I did exactly as I pleased. At the age of twenty I made my own choices as a constable. I aligned myself with the IFP and up to this day I never had a lecture, letter or pamphlet informing me the ANC is no longer a lot of terrorists."

Harrington's hero was Major Deon Terreblanche – notorious for his killing sprees. "He was actually like my father. He was interested in my work. He always wanted to know how I was. He told me I personally have to fight against the

ANC, because they were communists. He said he would see to it that I never get into trouble."

But a *kitskonstabel* with ANC sympathies killed Terreblanche.

"A few days before the Seven Day War we buried Major Deon. I cried constantly. I drank to forget. I grieved for that man. I carried him at his funeral – how could I not have loved that man? But when I look at what he did, then I know I should not have loved him, but when I think of him with my heart, then I know that man was my father... that man I loved."

And his mother?

"At that stage she was dying of cancer."

The camera picks up the thin line flowing from the corner of Harrington's left eye over his cheek. He raises his right hand stiffly and tries to wipe it inconspicuously from his face.

"I grew up in jail. I was just 21 when I was sentenced. But my fear now belongs to the past. As I leave this stage here today I will be a marked man for the rest of my life. I have just betrayed the police motto: One for all and all for one. I will be stigmatized as a traitor because I have named every individual who worked with me – and when you fight like that, the only thing you have is trust. You trust on each other for your life. And I have betrayed them – all of them... but I beg you for forgiveness and peace."

When Harrington leaves the stage he bursts uncontrollably into tears. He is immediately taken to a special room for psychiatric support.

William Harrington was refused amnesty.

Amnesty application of policeman Hendrik Johannes Petrus Botha

"Under the pretext that he had toilet paper in his backpack, Laurie retrieved his backpack with the weapons and black bag from the combi. The five of us walked through the thick bushes to an opening on the Tugela River bank. Laurie put down his backpack and whilst Laurie, [Mbuso] Shabalala and Charles [Ndaba] were urinating at the river bank, Sam and I took the two silenced weapons out of the backpack.

"In the meantime Laurie had made Charles and Shabalala sit flat on the ground facing the direction of the river. Laurie told them we are taking them to a safe house in northern Natal. Sam and I came from behind and shot them in the back of the

head. After they had fallen we each shot a second time into the body. I shot Charles and Sam shot Shabalala. Sam and I removed their clothes, while Laurie returned to the vehicle to get concrete poles, hessian and wire.

"Laurie cut the wire into lengths and Sam rolled Charles and Shabalala separately in hessian after the concrete pole had been placed over their chest and legs. The wire was then tied around their bodies to keep the hessian and poles in position. Laurie and I then threw Charles's body into the river from the bank. I then assisted Sam in doing the same to Shabalala's body. We put the clothes into the black bag. Branches were broken off the trees and the bloodstains wiped away. We spent about an hour making sure that the area was clean and that the bodies had sunk."

Extract from Darren Taylor's radio interview with Lourens du Plessis

"What is of utmost importance is to examine the backgrounds in which we grew up. I mean that's where we were moulded. I'm not accusing anybody, but people were placed on a pedestal... not, I think, by intent, but it was carried over from the family conversations... What I would have liked to have done is to follow my conscience, because I really did have... the knowledge that we were doing wrong. I could figure it out for myself... those who never experience a prick of conscience, haven't got a conscience. I would really like to have the courage... to live according to my convictions, because during the seventies, I started feeling uncomfortable about things. I said on many occasions to my colleagues: 'You know, we're wrong! We're oppressing these people.' But this is as far as it went. I must say that I had a family to feed..."

(Du Plessis is a former SADF colonel. His name appears on the "death signal" calling for the permanent removal from society of the Cradock Four.)

Extract from Darren Taylor's interview with Gerrie Hugo

"An experiment was done to test the strength of motherhood with a baboon, a female baboon with a baby... where it was put in confinement and the

floor started heating up, so as to test how strong motherhood is, to check how far it will go before the baboon drops the baby... and gets on top of the baby to get away from the heat. In the end, the baboon couldn't take the pain any more and dropped the baby and got on top of the baby to get away from the heat. And I feel this is happening within the rank and file of the security forces... where the baby, being the operative, honestly believes that he will be protected by the powers that be, but the powers that be, the designers of the system and the planners, are starting to feel the heat and eventually... they drop the baby... and the operative must take that in mind, that that is going to happen to you. And the only way that you can protect yourself is to come forward now and come clean."

(Hugo is a former Military Intelligence operative in Namibia and South Africa.)

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Shame strangles the remembrance of you

It was different before. Victims told their stories to the Truth Commission. In another hall, at another time, in front of another committee, perpetrators explained their deeds. But the amnesty hearing of police captain Jeffrey Benzien seizes the heart of truth and reconciliation – the victim face to face with the perpetrator – and tears it out into the light.

Never before had the double-edged relationship between the torturer and the tortured been depicted as graphically as it was that week in the small, stuffy hall of the Truth Commission in Cape Town. Initially the body language of the tortured was clear: no one else counts, not the Amnesty Committee, not the lawyers, not the audience – what counts today is you and me. And we sit opposite each other, just like ten years ago. Except that I am not at your mercy – you are at mine. And I will ask you the questions that have haunted me ever since.

But it isn't that easy.

The first indication of the complexity of the relationship between an infamous torturer and his victim is the voice of Tony Yengeni. As a Member of Parliament, Yengeni's voice has become known for its tone of confidence – sometimes tinged with arrogance. When he faces Benzien, this is gone. From where I sit taking notes, I have to get up to make sure that it really is

Yengeni speaking. He sounds strangely different – his voice somehow choked. Instead of seizing the moment to get back at Benzien, Yengeni wants to know the man.

"...What kind of man...uhm...that uses a method like this one with the wet bag to people... to other human beings... repeatedly...and listening to those moans and cries and groans... and taking each of those people very near to their deaths... what kind of man are you, what kind of man is that, that can do... what kind of human being can do that, Mr Benzien?... I'm talking now about the man behind the wet bag."

At Yengeni's insistence, Benzien demonstrates the wet bag method. "I want to see it with my own eyes." The judges, who have come a long way from meticulously sticking to court procedures, jump up so as not to miss the spectacle. Photographers come running, not believing their luck. And the sight of this bluntly built white man squatting on the back of a black victim, who lies face down on the floor, and pulling a blue bag over his head will remain one of the most loaded and disturbing images in the life of the Truth Commission.

But for this moment, Yengeni has to pay dearly.

Back at the table, Benzien quietly turns on him and with one accurate blow shatters Yengeni's political profile right across the country.

"Do you remember, Mr Yengeni, that within thirty minutes you betrayed Jenniler Schreiner? Do you remember pointing out Bongani Jonas to us on the highway?"

And Yengeni sits there – as if begging this man to say it all; as if betrayal or cowardice can only make sense to him in the presence of this man.

"A special relationship" is what Benzien says existed between him and Ashley Forbes. Forbes, biting his upper lip, tries to get Benzien to admit to acts which had clearly plunged him into months of hell, driving him to the point of suicide.

BENZHEN: You I can remember especially because I think that the two of us, after weeks of your confinement, really became quite close... I may be mistaken, but I would say relatively good friends in a way... I assaulted you that first day... but then I took you on a trip... and I'm not saying this flippantly... you said that it is the most Kentucky Fried Chicken you've ever ate... and then we went to the Western Transvaal where you pointed out arms caches... Do

you remember the time when you saw snow for the first time... what happened in the snow next to the N1... and the trip to Colesberg, how you braaied with me?

FORBES: Is it true that you tortured me every month on the 16th as a kind of anniversary of when you arrested me?

BENZIEN: In the spirit of reconciliation, you are making a mistake...

FORBES: On the second occasion I was wrapped in a carpet... my clothes were removed and the wet bag method used on me... Do you remember that you said you were going to break my nose by putting both your thumbs into my nostrils, ripping them until blood came out of my nose?

BENZIEN: I know you had a nosebleed but I thought that was as a result of the smack I gave you.

Benzien reminds Forbes that he always brought him fruit on Sundays, and how at great risk he smuggled Westerns – Forbes's favourite reading material – into the cell. The images of snow and fruit blend into the relationship of the protector and the vulnerable – a union in which both could live out fantasy and nightmare. When Forbes mentions anal penetration, Benzien purses his lips disapprovingly: "I deny that, and I'm deeply disappointed that you say that."

All this time, Ashley Forbes's wife is sitting in the row behind her husband's torturer. When Benzien mentions the kind way she greeted him that morning, he is overcome with emotion.

A torturer's success depends on his intimate knowledge of the human psyche. Benzien is a connoisseur. Within the first few minutes he manages to manipulate most of his victims back into the roles of their previous relationship – where he has the power and they the fragility. He uses several techniques to achieve this during the amnesty hearings. He sits alone, for three days, in the same grey suit and tie. At a press conference afterwards, the victims remark how strange it was to see him so alone. He constantly drinks water. He tells how in the past his children had to be escorted by police because he was such a hated man. How they knew about the wet blanket kept in the bath in case of a petrol-bomb attack on the house. Benzien remembers his victims' code names, the exact words they spoke, their unique mannerisms. All of them confirm that he was feared nationally –

he could get the information he wanted in less than thirty minutes.

"Cape Town had the same potential as Johannesburg, Pretoria and Durban for shopping-mall bombs – but I, with respect Mr Chairman, did my work well."

Gary Kruser is now a director in the police force, in command of the VIP protection unit. Neatly and professionally, he asks Benzien: "What happened after you arrested me?"

"I didn't arrest you, sir," says Benzien. "Perhaps you confuse me."

Kruser snaps: "I KNOW YOU. It was you!"

But Benzien does not remember.

KRUSER: Is it not true that you and Goosen assaulted me throughout the trip in the combi... that you sat on my head... after you arrested me outside the bioscope?

BENZIEN: I cannot remember the arrest... but if you say we assaulted you in the combi then I would concede that in all probability we did... I don't know how though...

KRUSER: Do you remember when we arrived at Culemborg you hung me up?

BENZIEN: Hung you up! What you refer to as "hanging up" – is that handcuffing you to the burglar-proofing?

KRUSER: Yes... so that my feet do not touch the ground and then hitting me in the stomach...

Then Kruser breaks down and the protruding eyes of Benzien look concerned that this man, who is now his boss, is crying. Considering the whole state of affairs – Benzien's expression might be saying – what happened to you does not seem so bad.

But for Kruser it is too much for flesh and feelings: that this experience, which has nearly destroyed his life, made not the slightest imprint on Benzien's memory.

KRUSER: (*in a stern voice*) Did you ever get information out of me?

BENZIEN: (*snappy*) No sir!

KRUSER: Was anybody ever arrested because of me?

BENZIEN: No sir!

Then Kruser sits up straight – the way he was sitting before the hearing started. Behind Benzien sit the victims of his torture – in a row chained by

friendship and betrayal. Yengeni betrayed Jonas, Jonas pointed out people in albums, Peter Jacobs betrayed Forbes, Forbes pointed out caches, Yassir Henry betrayed Anton Fransch. During the tea break they stand together in the passages with their painful truths of triumph and shame. As everybody is leaving Benzien grabs the hand of Ashley Forbes tightly in both his own – Forbes smiling shyly under his thin moustache.

SB/TRC/JACOBS

Police captain Jeff Benzien's first torture victim – Peter Jacobs – has accused him of not making a full disclosure to the Amnesty Committee. Jacobs – now a National Crime Intelligence superintendent – says Benzien has only conceded to the truth about his other torture methods following information from his former victims in cross-examination. Antjie Samuel reports:

TRANSCRIPT OF VOICE REPORT: Benzien has not come out with the whole story, says Peter Jacobs. During cross-examination, Benzien admitted that he had shocked Jacobs with an electric device in the nose, ears, genitals and rectum. He also described the so-called "watch ruse", when policemen changed the time on their watches to give Jacobs the impression that he had been interrogated until the afternoon. Benzien said that when they told Jacobs they would continue the next day, he volunteered to show where Ashley Forbes was hiding. Jacobs knew Forbes would be gone by the afternoon. Benzien also admitted telling Jacobs: "I'll take you to the verge of death as many times as I want to." Antjie Samuel – SABC Radio News – Cape Town.

Beyond the Grape Curtain (by Sandile Dikeni)
And so continues the torture of Tony Yengeni. Yengeni broke in under thirty minutes, suffocating in a plastic bag which denied him air and burnt his lungs, under the hands of Benzien. In the mind of Benzien, Yengeni, freedom fighter and anti-apartheid operative, is a weakling, a man that breaks easily...

I said I am not gonna write no more columns like this, but the torture of Yengeni continues, with some of us regarding him as a traitor to the

cause, a sell-out, a cheat and, in some stupid twist of faith and fate, his torturer becomes the hero, the revealer, the brave man who informed us about it all.

Tony Yengeni in my eyes remains the hero. Yengeni is one of the many people in the ANC executive who stood by the TRC, knowing that certain issues about the ANC would be revealed in the most mocking and degrading way by their torturers. In my eyes, Yengeni of Guguletu is one of the people who still gives me hope amidst the caprice of the present.

And not only Benzien, but many of us, owe him an apology.

And now, as I look at Yengeni, yes, I see blood, his own blood on the hands of Benzien and the Apartheid state. I see blood. The blood of Yengeni's friends and comrades crushed and sucked out of their lungs by the heroes of Apartheid – in under forty minutes, says the torturer, in his clinically precise "full disclosure".

I said I am not gonna write no more columns like this.

I made a mistake.

(Cape Times)

For the first time, the Amnesty Committee calls and cross-examines a psychologist. Ria Kotze, who testifies on the psychological aspects of Captain Jeffrey Benzien's personality, has been counselling Benzien since 1994 when he had a nervous breakdown. Initially Kotze was treating Benzien's wife for depression, but she was called in to treat him too after an attack she describes as an auditory hallucination.

I go to speak to her after her submission. What does "auditory hallucination" mean?

"It means he heard voices, but more I cannot tell you. This was the only thing that Benzien asked me not to talk about."

"Now why was that?"

"It's the only thing he has left – this little incident – and it is his pride that he has kept it to himself."

When Benzien comes out for a smoke break, I ask him about the term.

"I can't tell you, except that I thought I was going out of my mind." He smokes shakily.

"But is it accusing voices, new voices, familiar ones...?"

He walks off: "Leave me . . . God, just leave me alone."

The clearest description of what Benzien was experiencing comes from Kotze's testimony. She says Benzien was sitting on his veranda one evening, smoking a cigarette, and then he had a flashback – so intense and real that he burst into tears. His wife called Kotze and told her that when she asked Benzien what was wrong, he kept on saying: "I cannot tell you – I'm too ashamed." Kotze says Benzien suffers from a severe form of self-loathing.

The Amnesty Committee uses the opportunity of Kotze's appearance to explore the issue of memory loss. Several perpetrators claim not to remember certain things and the Committee is obviously not sure whether people are genuinely traumatized or whether they are deliberately hiding information and so do not fulfill the amnesty requirement of full disclosure.

The first issue raised by the victims' advocate is the textbook definition of post-traumatic stress: it can only be experienced by a victim. And the fundamental characteristic of the victim is a feeling of helplessness, intense fear, and powerlessness. Surely Benzien cannot be classified as a victim?

(If this definition is accurate, why do the Commissioners, the briefers, the statement takers, the journalists all get psychological treatment?)

Benzien was a victim of his inhumane working conditions, Kotze says. He was a good cop at Murder and Robbery. But he was so good that he was moved to Security where he had to create these torture methods to fulfill the expectations about him. This destroyed his whole sense of self.

The Amnesty Committee wants to know how Benzien can say one minute that he does not remember and insist the next minute that something did *not* happen. Is it possible to forget and be quite sure at the same time?

All of this centers on what advocate Robin Brink describes as "the nasty broom-stick episode".

Famous Western Cape MK member Nicola Pedro was caught on his way to Lesotho, where he was supposed to meet with MK cadres. Their names were in a letter which he was only to open once he had crossed the border. When he was caught he told the security police he had swallowed the letter – "I lied," says Pedro. Benzien then took him to a separate room, spread a newspaper and ordered him to defecate. Then the nationally famous torturer put on surgical gloves and worked through whatever was on the newspaper. When nothing was found, he pushed his finger up Pedro's anus. Then he took a broomstick and told Pedro: "I'll find the letter, even if I go up to your stomach."

Pedro, just released from an institution for alcoholics, testifies in tears before the Committee. Benzien emphatically denies that he ever used a broomstick. He looks quite shocked when the claim is made. He denies it, over and over.

To reconstruct your memory, to beautify it, is an ordinary human trait, says the psychologist. Most people do it. But there are probably three kinds of memory loss. The first is voluntary – you change your memory because you are under threat, because you cannot bear to live with the reality. The second kind is involuntary – something is so traumatic that it rips a hole in your memory, and you cannot remember the incident or what happened just before and after it. But there is also a third kind of memory loss and that occurs when you testify in public. Kotze says Benzien's stress levels were so compounded by having to testify and his anxiety about how this might affect the last bits of life he has with his wife and children, that it is quite possible he remembered even less than usual.

How to distinguish between lies and memory loss?

Slowly, as if speaking to herself: "In my job there are, in a sense, no lies – all of it ties in, reacts to, plays upon the truth . . ."