My Danie Theron

Abstract
It's the 1901 photograph of me that's most admired by sentimental fanciers of Boer War Heroes, one where I'm standing behind my pushbike, left hand holding the handlebars, right hand steadying the saddle. My legs are straddled and there's a jaunty twist to my hips. I look off to the left, my head turned away from the handlebars. My head is at a different angle from my torso, and my legs on a different plane from my body, exactly as if I'd been posed by, say, Michelangelo. My stance emphasizes my readiness to leap onto the saddle and pedal away - spy, scout, courier, and gadfly to the Tommies. Antjie Theron, my brother's great-granddaughter and the Researcher in this case, is one such sentimental fancier. She pours over the deteriorating picture, and I pour with her, my presence at her shoulder a vague odour of bicycle-chain and sweaty leather, an odour she loves, for she too has ridden bicycles all her life and at fifty has strong legs.
It’s the 1901 photograph of me that’s most admired by sentimental fanciers of Boer War Heroes, one where I’m standing behind my push-bike, left hand holding the handlebars, right hand steadying the saddle. My legs are straddled and there’s a jaunty twist to my hips. I look off to the left, my head turned away from the handlebars. My head is at a different angle from my torso, and my legs on a different plane from my body, exactly as if I’d been posed by, say, Michelangelo. My stance emphasizes my readiness to leap onto the saddle and pedal away – spy, scout, courier, and gadfly to the Tommies. Antjie Theron, my brother’s great-granddaughter and the Researcher in this case, is one such sentimental fancier. She pours over the deteriorating picture, and I pour with her, my presence at her shoulder a vague odour of bicycle-chain and sweaty leather, an odour she loves, for she too has ridden bicycles all her life and at fifty has strong legs.

My twisted pose is in contrast to my Mauser tied to the bike’s crossbar and cutting the photo in half lengthwise, making it more interesting to the connoisseur of this art-form, I dare say. The hat I wear has a high crown and a broad-enough brim so that my watchful eyes are partly obscured, the shading lending a brushstroke of sadness, which is false. I was not sad on the day the photo was taken, nor on any other day of this, for me, entertaining war. I’m not sad today as I crouch against a boulder on this koppie, my buttocks resting on the warm sand. I listen to the shells like hot metallic insects around me, knowing one will shatter me sooner or later. But I’m grinning, as is the Researcher, at the thought that Captain Hart and his brigade surrounding this hill in the Gatsrand don’t know that I alone am up here and not a whole barrel of Boers.

To return to the photo: I was then wearing a tidy moustache, though I would shave it off when I wanted to ape a pink-cheeked London lad and deceive a local encampment of Brits. Like the apparition of someone’s school-chum, I would stroll out of the dark into their firelight, encased neatly in a stolen uniform, and raise my cap. I would present my pass from Colonel Methuen and join them at rations, my accent upper-upper, impeccably so. In the morning, if there was time, I would play a round of polo. But there were also times when my exhaustion was such that I wished the Tommies would see the cracks in my disguise, knock me
Sheila Roberts

down, arrest me, and send me off sunburnt and half-starving with other prisoners-of-war, to lean against a stucco wall in Ceylon, to wait for peace. I would then have had time to relax and learn yet another language, Tamil, maybe, or Arabic.

My old school blazer in that photograph has grown rather tight and short, as Antjie notices. In my blazer pockets I have clean stones to suck in case I run out of water; tobacco in a pouch made of Red Indian skin given to me by an American; my pipe and matches; a half-chewed piece of biltong, slimy at one end from saliva and now picking up fluff in my pocket; two hard biscuits, an apple, a whistle, a comb and broken mirror; and a threadbare handkerchief tied at the corners to use as a cap. The pass given me by Methuen is in the lining my hat; there is money in my back pocket; and from my belt, warm in its sheath, hangs a yatagan given to me by Hassan the Arab.

That was then, now I sit on top of a hill and I have none of my things except pipe, tobacco, matches, and money. But I am myself. I am Theron, a cherub-faced spy and a master-blaster of bridges and rails. A ghost; a stalking cat; a snake in the grass. A Pied Piper who led his polyglot pack behind enemy lines. I’m good-dogs Rover and Wagter for General De Wet, my eyes bright at his heels. I am his Ear and Nose.

When Hart’s bullets finally tear my bone-cage and my rifle jerks parabolically from my hand, the Brigade will wait for returning fire. There’ll be none. They’ll wait while my blood drowns the ants and beetles under stones and flows into a mousehole. When they get up here, they’ll be speechless to find that only one man has been picking them off at whim. Incensed, they’ll kick my unidentified corpse, smashing in the mouth and the eye-sockets, and then dump the mess into a hole. After the war a monument will be built to me on the old road between Johannesburg and Potchefstroom, a monument the Researcher says she used to see many times on her bicycle trips from her pa’s farm to the Meisieshoër and back. She used to pick veld flowers to prop against the brickwork. You see, our family connection and her history books caused her fall in love with me. About me, General De Wet would write, and she, in love and sucking on her fingers, would read:

Men as lovable or as valiant there might be, but where should I find a man who combined so many virtues and good qualities in one person? When he received an order, or if he wished to do anything, then it was gou-gou maak ’n plan ...

This praise will, however, never enter the revisionist histories. Never mind. My spirit will wander over the Gatsrand where I died, and go past De Wet’s doorstep to the room where he works. I will sit, a cold breath at his elbow, and watch him write about how he was Generaal Gees, a ghost that the British could never capture. I try to remind him where his memory falters. Later still, I will follow him, whispering disregarded advice about the future as, old and ill in 1942, he will march with General
Louis Botha to take German South-West. Over his coffin my spirit will weep, for, except for Oom Paul, I loved him more than anyone. And when she’s tired out with translating De Wet’s High Dutch, my Antjie will cry also.

Two

I’ll die young so will remain forever young. I am like the Researcher’s husband who died when he was thirty and she thirty-one. She cannot forget him, and even now she has dreams where she rubs his naked chest and shoulders, smooth and hot to the touch, smells the boyish musk he still retains at thirty, and begs him, ‘Peter, please don’t go.’ Sometimes this dream-image makes love to her and she wakes shaking. She is incapable of imagining that young man as stomachy, dewlapped, and bald. Just as she cannot imagine me except as she sees me in a couple of photographs. The best, I think, is a pale shot of my head and shoulders, taken as if through gauze. It was the day of my matriculation and, what with my oiled curls, high frothy collar, and my expression of disdain, a collector of antiques could take it for an intaglio print, say of Frederic Chopin, and make a bid for it.

But it isn’t this glamorous photograph that interests the Researcher; it’s the other one. There I am, the boy-warrior, holding an iron horse. Soon she’ll also start dreaming of me, a dusty smiling fellow, lifting off his bandolier as he strides to her bed. As he plonks himself down to pull off his boots, he’ll sing to her, ‘Si vous m’aimez autant que je vous aime-e-e-e...’ And she’ll bundle up the hem of her nightie and laughingly stuff it into her mouth.

The sky is like a green lake shot over with red, and the breeze has grown into a wind. It sweeps over the plains and the newly planted mielie fields of those farms still being worked. It flows over the Drakensberge and the Bosveld, and whistles between the stones of cattle and sheep kraals where the beasts jostle, their nostrils steaming, their cries low and rough. It swings on shutters and unfastened doors in the deserted farmhouses, and wrinkles the brown waters of the rivers still low in their banks, for the summer rains are late. It freezes the men camping out and unable to light fires, as I am growing frozen. The wounded will die tonight in hospital tents and on filthy tarpaulins under bluegum trees. The dead British at Dundee and Magersfontein will move restlessly in their icy coffins.

Three

The Boer War. The unremembered war. The Researcher says it’s annoying the way no-one these days ever seems to have heard of that war. It’s just another of those silly little wars in faraway places, back in a past that had no impact on the wider course of history. But they are wrong. I mean, it’s obvious: the Boer War allowed experiments with telegraph and telephone,
helium balloons, Gatling-guns, camouflage uniforms, guerrilla tactics, barbed-wire fencing. Troops and officers trained in the Boer War were mature and seasoned by 1914, and elated at being part of the first real war since Napoleon's. No-one wants to hear about the Boer War, 'the last gentleman's war'? Wait while the Researcher and I have a grim laugh at that description! We wonder what the tens of thousands of black people sent out into the bare veld to starve or be caught in cross-fire thought about the gentlemen, how much all the emaciated women and children in the camps admired them.

No war ever is completely unremembered. As the Researcher says, if people live through atrocities it's as if their descendants beyond the tenth generation inherit a vengeful gene, an undying longing to repay the cruelty and the perceived injustice. How does that gene die out? I don't know. I am merely glad that I died before I married.

I will die never having made love to a woman, though I did become engaged, on January 1st, 1898, to Hannie Neethling, sixteen years old. The Researcher has dug up a photograph of her in a biography of me written in Dutch by Willem Brouwer de Janz. The camera caught Hannie from under her chin, shortening her neck and enlarging her nostrils. The dead whiteness of the background makes her black hair look like a big shapeless hat, so very misleading. She had the most luxurious mane of thick curly hair I've ever seen on an Afrikander woman.

Four

I never did get to sleep with Hannie nor to marry her. What I did enjoy about her though, was her boyish tennis-game. She would run and slide for the ball, sometimes grazing her knee. She wasn't one of those sissies who stand bored on the court, waiting for the ball to come to them. It was on August 1st of 1898, after Hannie and I'd played hard singles and were strolling back to the house, that she leaned into me saying, 'Ag, Danie ek voel so moeg, en die wind is so kwaai ...'. I helped her into the kitchen and poured some lemonade for her. As I turned, her face seemed to pulse up at me and her cheeks were crimson, the sweat standing on her forehead like tiny transparent stones. 'Daantjie,' she said, 'Ek kry vreeslik hoofpyn ... ek moet gaan le ...'.

I cycled home against the wind to Krugersdorp. I was busy all week, but on the Friday I sent for news. Mrs Neethling returned a note saying Hannie and her sister Mara both had bad colds and that I should stay away. So I spent the weekend watching the cricket matches at Seunshoer and catching up on my legal work. That Monday, Mr Neethling turned up at my office, his face bewildered. Both Hannie and Mara had died the night before, of double-pneumonia.

I could only stare at that takhaar farmer in fury. I was young and untried then, but had it been later, I would have punched him in the heart. Ag, so ... so .... Hannie and Mara had lain suffering for a week
with ‘bad colds’ and nobody had checked on them? At the funeral I was in a state of wooden grief and wouldn’t speak to her parents nor to anyone else. So the story got around that my life came to an end right there, that I could never love another woman, and that I instantaneously developed the ability to risk my life daily for Oom Paul.

Five

A heavy milk tart moon has risen and glides against the deep blue. As I come out of my own thoughts and mark it, I hear movement down below. I scramble carefully to peer over the rocks. Something is happening. Either they have given up and are moving the whole party away, horses and all, or they are bringing in reinforcements. Now I hear wheels and a metallic creaking. It’s time I reminded them that Theron is still as good as any ten men, even though he has eaten nothing for fifteen hours. I wait for the moonlight to glint onto metal, then I fire. I fling myself to a different position and fire. I keep moving fast and shooting, jubilant when I hear yells, but still keeping myself as low as possible behind what cover there is. A volley of panicked return fire bursts from all directions. I throw myself under the overhanging boulder that has been my protection all along. The shelling stops but the strange crunching continues. Then that too stops. I wait. Nothing. Again I creep to the edge and look over. The moon co-operates and I can now make out the long barrel of a cannon. *Die Liewe Here,* they’ve tugged a cannon from who-knows-where to blast my bloody body to the *melktert* moon! I sink back to my position under the boulder and light my pipe.

It’s ironic, you know: my step-sister, who raised me, used to jeer at me that I was ‘’n Ingelse Jintleman.’ I used to love to play cricket, and I easily learned to speak English like Mr McAlister our teacher. In the years that followed, I read Cicero, and especially the plays of Shakespeare. In my last years at school, I was growing adept at French and German, and cementing my mistrust of adults, particularly of those who had power over the young and the weak. It was during those years of high school that (like the Researcher) I developed my famous seriousness, to the extent that in 1896, when I was living in Mrs Mostert’s boarding-house, my fellow-boarders complained that I never laughed or smiled. That was my pose. The ridiculous, the obtuse, and the scabrous always inspired me to inner laughter. I was a born but silent ironist. Teasingly, the Researcher says, ‘Daantjie, you were a pair of flat eyes staring out of a smooth face, a wooden chappie going in and out of a cuckoo-clock.’ I laugh. Yes, and I was a member of no family, and a man who, once the war was in full steam, was to become one with all nations. I could’ve been a Gentleman but fate decided that I was to be the Boer spy-leader of a ragtag bunch of cosmopolitan backstreeters, all smooth-gliding and shadow-changing; all seeking to fight wherever on earth the British had started a quarrel.

But I loved my old Oom Paul. Why? That is not a reasonable question.
No-one can explain why he or she loves. Love achieves the self. It fills up all the empty hollows in the soul with sweetness and purpose. If it is itself and not a fraud, it is indestructible. (My now jealous Researcher says that this is quite enough sentiment: I must get on with my story.)

Six
I was part of the Burgher Contingent that reduced Dr Jameson and his raiders into a band of delinquent schoolboys. That was 1895, the year that a flame of contest was lit under my heart. However, over the next years we thought things could be settled without war, that angers had been tamped down like a camp-fire that sand has been kicked on. But in 1899, fresh twigs and leaves fell on to it, a wind sneaked in among the debris, and the fire flared up anew. In April 1899, Moneypeny, editor of The Star in Johannesburg, published a libellous article against Oom Paul, making him out to be a liar and a warmonger, and just at the time when die ou vader was breaking his heart over an imminent war he couldn’t prevent. My heart like granite in my chest, I ran to The Star’s offices.

I pushed past the alarmed office-boys and burst into Moneypeny’s office. Momentarily nonplussed by his look of terror, I hesitated, but then leapt across his desk and, grabbing him by the necktie, I shook the rolled-up newspaper in his face. I called him liar and bastard, and began knocking his head off. He tried to dodge my fist, but I caught him nicely on the ear. Crying like a calf, he fell out of his chair. Before I could jump on him with both feet, I was caught from behind by underlings and held fast for the constables.

Ag, wat pret! What heightened feelings! Three days later in court, I defended myself spiritedly. I was my own defending lawyer, and cross-questioned Moneypeny like a gatling-gun, forcing him to reveal his total ignorance about Oom Paul or of any burghers and their intentions. It came out that he knew a total of three burghers to speak to and he couldn’t read Dutch. All the same, I was fined twenty pounds. But, before the magistrate’s gavel hit the desk, the burghers who’d packed the court-room and who’d cheered me noisily, surged forward and together paid my fine.

Seven
When you read about Theron’s Scout Corps of international spies criss-crossing the veld on bicycles, you will want to laugh, imagining our surreal silhouettes, crouched over handlebars, black against a white sky, knees high and toes pointed as we pedal. But allow me to explain. Using bicycles was an effective plan thought up by me and Koos Jooste, the champion cyclist (consult your encyclopaedia, the Researcher advises, and you’ll find his name). Believe it or not, on a decent road, a new bicycle will go faster than a good horse, on a bad road a horse and a bicycle will equally be adversely affected. But bicycles don’t need food, water, rest. A moving cyclist is harder to hit with rifle fire than a galloping horse; a
bicycle costs less and a man can carry it over rocks or streams, he can carry it onto a train. The point is that I and my men used bicycles during the months before fighting started to scout strategic border spots and begin accumulating information about existing British encampments, the quality of the terrain, the availability of grazing and water, and the state of repair of the rail-lines. Do you think that Tommie sentries paid much attention when they saw a shabby unarmed boy on a bicycle going by? Not at all. Until October 1899, I worked with my scouts: Hassan the Arab; Guldenmond the Nederlander; Nelborski and Soliyenko who’d run away from politics in Russia; Scheepers and Hendriks the Afrikanders; Drummond from Major MacBride’s group; Weber the German; Vibert the Frenchman; Hallham wounded when fighting the Iroquois, and /Xahla our scout from the Kalahari. Check the names in Hein Koen’s Boer War if you don’t believe me or Antjie. November 1899, I joined Generals Joubert and Botha in Natal.

Eight
The sum-total of legendary characters in South Africa’s divided history is not that large. I am one of them and I know that foreigners tend to smile in disbelief at my exploits. People ask, How could Danie Theron have crossed through enemy lines like immaterial wind and slip past a member of the Gordon Highlanders tasting stew at a blazing camp-fire? How can we possibly believe that he disguised himself as a British officer and was entertained by the unsuspecting Devonshires to dinner?

But I would suggest you put aside your scepticism for a moment. Consider – this is important – I am short, a mere 5’ 2”. I believe that had I grown to 6’2” and weighed 200 lbs. instead of 100, I could never have done what I did. Also, had I been that huge, I would have been that cliché, a gentle giant, mild-natured and placid. I would have excelled in sport, instead of pacing the schoolgrounds memorizing Tennyson’s In Memoriam or Tintern Abbey by William Wordsworth. While we are discussing physiology, let me point out that my feet are small but well-knit, the arches strong, the toes long. I balance easily on one foot. I can walk on tiptoe for long stretches without tiring, and my toes seem to sense obstacles as a cat’s whiskers do even before they are seen. I know my name is going to be lost and my exploits be as if they had never happened. In centuries to come, the Researcher says, Boer history will become stories to frighten children, if that, even as the story-tellers’ faces grow grim. The tales will be of big-hatted horsemen with no heads who ride like veld-fires into the grasslands and over the hutments.

Nine
There is a slender line of pink light dividing the night-clouds. Soon dawn will be upon us and I will be dead. There has been silence below for some time, but now I can hear Hart’s men adjusting the cannon. I think I have
time to tell you only one last story - a train story.

As I’ve said, I’m not a person given overmuch to laughter. But that armoured train made me laugh. It was supposed to be an impregnable travelling fortress. From a distance it looked like a clockwork centipede, the monstrous toy of an arrogant god. From Frere Station onwards, the Natal Mounted Police rode ahead of the train to check for possible trouble along the line. They might have saved themselves the effort, for we were well-hidden. However, five or so miles further, someone on the train spotted Oosthuizen’s men circling toward the rear. The train stopped and was put into reverse. Good. My men and I were soon at the line, able to begin hauling boulders onto it. Meanwhile, more burghers had ridden out of the hills to the front and were shelling without pause. As the breakdown-wagon, in reverse, hit the rocks, it did a somersault in the air and landed on its roof to the side of the track. We hid, watching as the surviving Tommies fired from the two trucks still standing, or ran for the bushes.

The poor engine-driver panicked and went scuttling under the standing trucks. ‘Let’s go, Kaptein,’ said my men. ‘Wait,’ I said. ‘Watch!’ An officer was forcing the engine-driver at gunpoint to climb back into the locomotive and get it going slowly forward. He, meanwhile, valorously went to uncouple the engine from the trucks behind. That achieved, he jumped up to warn those inside what was taking place. So the engine groaned forward. ‘The engine’s yours,’ I said to the others, while Venter and I galloped back and circled round the trucks, and as the officer jumped down, hoping to run for the engine, we went after him. Venter later said that he had fun playing tag with the man, until he grew tired of it, and got him in the sights of his Mauser. Only then did Mr Churchill stand and allow himself to be nosed forward by Venter’s horse.

I had Churchill. He had lost his hat in the game with Venter, so I gave him a spare cap from my saddle-bags. He was a man of medium height but slenderly built then. His shoulders were as narrow as mine, but already he had a soft womanish stomach pushing against his sambrown. He stood with casual boredom, awaiting instructions, his head lunged slightly forward, one leg outstretched. We set our prisoners marching to one of our large encampments, where we gave them coffee and bread. Later, Churchill was to write, ‘So they were not cruel men, these enemy.’ To his credit, he remained in Boer hands for only three weeks, managing to escape from a disused school-building that we used as a prison and making his way to Lourenço Marques – which is another story.

Some of the history books will tell you that I was caught and shot as I tried to disconnect the water-supply to Johannesburg. The sensible among you will ask how any one man could have attempted such a thing. Not that I wouldn’t have minded punishing Johannesburg by arranging for it to wake one morning to find no water for coffee or shaving, or for the servants to wash in before they came in to make the breakfast. But the
Researcher will tell you vehemently that the Gatsrand where I am lurking is in the Ventersdorp area and far from the Vaal Dam, which feeds water to Johannesburg.

I am not much of a moralist, but I do have religion, the kind that believes that the Creator sees me at all times, and keeps His finger on the crown of my head, there where my hair grows thin. I believe it pleased Him when Lord Roberts announced a one-thousand-pounds reward for my capture, for this was tangible proof that His direction was effective, my head going where His finger directed it. And, a mere week ago, when I was informed by our High Command that orders were coming through for my promotion to Combat-General, the joy rose from my stomach up through my chest and into the backs of my eyes. ‘Ag, kyk hoe snaaks lag Theron,’ said Nel. I was proud of my God’s finger.

They are shooting cannon balls, but they are falling wide. The stench and the dense smoke are ruining the delicate light of the dawn. The birds are silent. And, in the wake of the cannon’s crash, the rifle fire comes like hail on a tin roof. I feel something like a large hot hand push me in the chest.

Ten

One night when I was in primary school at Bethlehem, hungry, I decided to climb into the food-store in the back shed, the door of which was always kept locked by Mevrou in case the blacks stole from her. I got through the pantry window easily enough. How nice were the smells, of coffee and sugar, samp-mielies and peanuts, dried fruit and mebos. I stared at the jars of konfyt on the shelves, gold and green in the faint light from the backdoor lamp, and at the white and blue labelled tins of condensed milk. But I could take only what I could get into my pockets, because I needed my hands to climb with. I took peanuts and dried peaches, and I stuck a stick of biltong into my shirt. Then I took a small wrinkled apple and held it firm with my teeth. It was even easier getting up from the inside because I could climb on to a large bag of flour. As I was about to lower myself on the other side, I heard a loud voice shouting, ‘Jou bliksemse dief!’ I lost my grip and fell flat onto my back, knocking the wind out of my stomach and bringing a horrible pain to my chest. I still could not speak from the pain when somebody lifted me by the scruff of my neck and kicked me in the pelvis. There was the distant sound of bone smashing. I could hear rasping and grunting as I tried to say to this person, ‘Ag, Broeder, los my ... ek het amper niks gevat nie ... just dried fruit and peanuts ... let me go.’

‘Let him go!’ begs the Researcher, dropping her head and smudging her undusted keyboard with her tears.