JaJa

Abstract
To my ears, Afrikaans has a long, heavy sound. The straat in Pretoria are full of Vans. Van Reeseman, Van Riebeeck, Van Heerden, Van Der Hoff, Van Der Stell. The straat vowels are like the stretched avenues that part the city — Daspoort, Haarhoff, Moot, Root, Bloed. The Voortrekkers had scattered Afrikaans inland, away from the English Cape, away from their 1902 defeat, where I was to find it and where the pupils in the Black townships were forced to learn it. The Afrikaners had a National Party and wanted a national language. It was a powerful language, a tongue that crushed anti-Afrikaans demonstrations in Soweto. To hell with Afrikaans. Do not want Afrikaans.
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Ja Ja is locked behind bars on the sixth floor, confined to her cell and limited by speech; her Cypriot dialect. Besides, Pretoria is a deadly place. There are break-ins, murders, muggings and rapes. So she defends herself in her apartment, apartheid, apartness. She guards her prison from the inside, protecting the reminders, the remainders from Cyprus — coffee cups and saucers, silver trays, hand-made lace table cloths and a small bottle filled with hurried sand from her now occupied village of Morfu, which Chris calls morphine sand just as he calls his grandmother Ja ja (yes yes in Afrikaans instead of yiayia). There’s a small stuffed donkey from Cyprus at the entrance and behind the black bars it looks like a grey zebra.

Ja ja hovers above the hob while her daughter and son-in-law are out slapping spoonfuls of pap and meat onto empty plastic plates at their café. When they bring their purple veined legs home they complain that business is slow, that workers haven’t got money for food. They worry that their business will close. ‘I’m worry about that man,’ Eleni says in her broken English, in whatever English she managed to save from what she heard in the café. ‘What man?’ asks her husband balancing bulgur wheat and home-made yogurt on his fork. ‘That man Dela on Robinson Crusoe Island. I feel problem.’ They never eat what they sell in the café, it’s not theirs. Hot home-cooked food, tastes of the island, waits for them — stuffed vine leaves, broad beans in tomato sauce, meat balls and fresh vegetables brought from the Portuguese greengrocer.

During confession, Ja ja lets Father Anastasi know that she refuses to die in South Africa, to be buried next to strangers, to be buried a foreigner on African soil, forgotten. She wants to go home, return to Cyprus where her husband had been put to rest, heartbroken. Her son has been shattered to pieces driving over a landmine in Rhodesia, fighting another country’s war, defending a country for other people. There was nothing left of him to put in the earth. He was missing a body like 1619 others in Cyprus. He missed the invasion. He missed his own history. He was missed.
THE GREAT TREK

Here we are, uprooted, unsettled in Sunnyside, Pretoria, South Africa with a permanent permit of residency. *Welkom in Suid-Afrika*. We are wanted here in the Capital, welcomed refugees. We fall neatly into the White European category. No doubts, no questions, plain and simple, black and white. We are settlers, we are fighters, we are survivors and good breeding stock. Our comforting relationship with our supportive South African neighbours in our war against an independent Zimbabwe makes it easy for us in this foreign yet familiar land. We were here during the sanctions, raiding the well-stocked shopping centres, then driving back satisfied through the border crossing at Beitbridge. The grass was always greener on the other side.

And my father, the pioneer, is wearing his suit and holding his elephant hide briefcase from Rhodesia. He’s moving into the diamond business, putting his Rhodesian shopkeeper days behind him. We have been trekking in reverse, from Cyprus, to Rhodesia to South Africa. We have made our way from Salisbury, Cecil John Rhodes’ capital city southwards, against his Cape-to-Cairo dream. Now we have landed ourselves in the heart of another struggler’s territory; a place where the wagon wheels of the Voortrekkers came to a grinding halt. Our new beginning starts where the Great Trek ended. My father was full of admiration for the early South African colonial fore-trekkers. In Greek, he would say, ‘Look, this is Pretorius’ city or this is Johannes’ city’ when we drove past Pretoria or Johannesburg. Perhaps it was because his insignificant island of Cyprus had been conquered so many times in the past that he now wanted to identify with the mighty, conquering side or perhaps he admired the Boers’ courage and hopes for a better life and their drive north. His faith lay south, in the words of his school friends who had left Cyprus in the ’60s and ’70s to settle in Rhodesia and South Africa.

He gives us a brief history of our new homeland, starting with the *Ntotsi*. He calls the Afrikaners, *Ntotsi* because it sounds like the English word Dutch. He forgets that the Dutch have been here longer than him and they are now called Afrikaners. In South Africa we are named after our language; Greek. His short account begins and finishes with the Europeans. ‘The *Ntotsi* landed in the Cape in the 17th century. They were like us Cypriots who came into conflict with the English.’ At this point he starts confusing his story and talks about his school days in Cyprus and how he would often throw stones at the English as a form of resistance. By the time he comes back to talking about the *Ntotsi* there is little else to say. ‘So they tried to escape the British Colonial administration by mass migration northwards.’ He doesn’t know the whole story, so he keeps it simple. There is too much history to remember, layer upon layer. He has too much history to remember.
There are only two views to choose from. It’s a two bedroom flat. I choose the past. When I squeeze my head through the bars of my bedroom window, I can see Monument Hill, home of the towering Voortrekker Monument. It lies just beyond the jacaranda trees that line the streets and past the segregated railway line that brings workers from the township into the city, like arteries pumping life to the centre. This colossal, cold, granite memorial is a daily reminder of a past. It is an Afrikaner past, a past for Blacks, for the Zulu, the Ndebele, the Coloureds, the English, the Portuguese, the Indians, the majority, the minority, the victors, the victims, the slaves, the ancestors, the oppressed, the onlookers, the tourists. It even serves as a reminder for the Cypriot refugees in Flat 102 who never forget.