



Xan Rice, age twelve, outside Buxton House, Potchefstroom High School for Boys, 1987
Courtesy of the author

OLD SCHOOL

Xan Rice

Late on a Sunday afternoon in August on the Highveld. The sky is bright and cloudless and the air thin and cold. The road is clear.

I know this road.

The tabletop mine dumps, Johannesburg shrinking in the rear-view mirror, Soweto to the right, Lenasia to the left. *Townships, locations.* Do they even use those words any more?

At the crossroads the squatter camp is still there after all these years, beneath a billboard where a politician promises FLUSHING TOILETS FOR ALL. The urban sprawl yields to smallholdings and scrubland and the landscape reveals its winter coat. Red-brown soil, fallow grass, coils of smoke, a lick of flame. Black and white plastic bags stabbed by barbed wire. A cordon of yellow police tape near a stop sign.

Ahead, a flash of silver. The finders-keepers guy! Hubcaps shed by cars hurtling along the highway, dusted and buffed, displayed in neat rows or mounted on sticks like giant metallic sunflowers.

The sinking sun turns to silhouettes the stripes of blue gums and the towers of the gold mines, the deepest in the world, a sign says. It is dark when I finally reach the town of Potchefstroom.

I first travelled this road in January 1987, a twelve-year-old boy heading to a state-run boarding school. My mother in the passenger seat, my father at the wheel, his elbow out the window, a cigarette

between his fingers. Me, nervous but mostly excited. My brother, two years older, quiet, knowing what was to come.

Nearly five years later I left the school and the road behind. It was the end of 1991, the last year of racially segregated education in South Africa, the dying days of apartheid. I only really knew one person who was not white.

In 1838, three years after leaving the Cape Colony, a wealthy sheep farmer named Andries Hendrik Potgieter and his Voortrekker followers halted their ox wagons on the banks of the Mooi River.

Quickly their laager became a settlement, a town, capital of the Boer's Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek and then a battlefield prize. Volleys of gunfire in Potchefstroom in 1880 signalled the start of the First Anglo-Boer War, in which the Boers emerged triumphant. Two decades later the British returned to scorch the earth, burning homesteads and cornfields and slaughtering cattle. Colonial soldiers herded Boer women and children into a concentration camp in Potchefstroom, a tactic replicated across the Boer territories. More than 27,000 Afrikaners died in the camps, along with up to 20,000 black Africans who were separately confined.

At the end of the war, Lord Alfred Milner, the governor of the Transvaal and Orange River Colonies, sought to anglicise the defeated republics. He ordered the establishment of half a dozen English-language schools in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Potchefstroom. They were to be modelled on British institutions such as Eton and Harrow and staffed with young Oxbridge graduates.

The site chosen for the boys' school in Potchefstroom was the former concentration camp. The two areas where the flimsy tents had been pitched were marked out as a cricket oval and a rugby field. In between rose the handsome school building with its Cape Dutch facade.

'College', as Potchefstroom High School for Boys became known, opened in 1905 with the aim of producing young men 'who are responsible, self-disciplined, independent in their thinking, tolerant and well-mannered'.

The first house was named Granton, after the Edinburgh district where the headmaster grew up, and the second was called Milton. Buxton was the last to be built, a double-storey block in the far corner of the grounds, nearest the railway line. Pupils were allocated randomly between the three houses when they were accepted at the school. I was sent to Buxton, which had a reputation for being the most rebellious house, run more by the senior boys than the housemasters.

All the Buxton ‘newboys’ were directed to a large ground-floor dormitory called Dorm One where twenty metal-frame beds were arranged a foot apart in two facing rows. My parents carried in my trunk and packed my clothes into a tall metal locker. Outside on the grass I posed stiffly for a photograph in my uniform: brown shoes, grey trousers, white shirt, navy blazer with an orange springbok-horn badge and vertical yellow stripes, matching tie. On my head a straw boater several sizes too big.

The Buxton newboys were a motley bunch. Some, like me, came from the Witwatersrand. Others lived in the Orange Free State or blink-and-you-miss-it towns in Western Transvaal. There was a strapping boy from Botswana whose family owned a cattle farm and another one from Potchefstroom whose father bred chickens in such numbers that he owned a fleet of sports cars.

That first night we were each assigned as a fag to a matric, as the final-year pupils were known. For the next eleven months it would be our job to make his bed, polish his shoes, lay out his clothes in the morning, squeeze toothpaste onto his toothbrush, fetch him tea, procure snacks and sometimes cigarettes, and carry his books to and from class.

In the morning, lugging two satchels, the newboys hurried to the school buildings, five minutes away. The classrooms were arranged in a rectangle around the hall, into which we filed for assembly, the senior boys sitting on chairs, the rest of us on the floor. If we looked up at the walls we could read the names of ‘Our Glorious Dead’, old boys who died fighting for the Allies in the world wars or while

servicing in the national army after South Africa became a republic in 1961. Higher still was an orange, white and blue South African flag that had once flown over parliament, a gift to the school from the local MP, a former minister of police.

After a Bible reading and a prayer we stood to sing a hymn from the tiny blue songbooks that we all carried in our blazer pockets and which served a dual purpose. At break the newboys swarmed around the noticeboard and scrawled in the book margins the line-ups of the first cricket, hockey and rugby teams. These we were obliged to memorise, along with the house and school war cries, the school song, and the names of all eighty or so matrics, who took it upon themselves to test us.

This normally occurred after lunch when we returned to our houses for roll call. The whole of Buxton assembled in Dorm One, squeezing between the newboys' beds, which were often 'stripped', the mattress exposed and the sheet and blanket and counterpane tangled on top, because they had not been made neatly enough. The duty prefect read out the names of those of us who had committed other crimes: failing sweeping, bathroom or picking-up-rubbish duty; not making it out of the house before the exit bell. A few matrics then sifted through the letters pile, smelling any envelope from Potch Girls' High to see if it was scented with perfume, before flinging it in the direction of the intended recipient.

I wrote home every couple of days.

*Dear Mom and Dad. I have quite a few friends and get along with everyone . . . I am sorry I could not speak to Dad or you on the phone as I would have cried. Love from Xan
PLEASE WRITE SOON.*

Dear Mom and Dad. The night before last I plugged locker and bathroom locker inspection. I await my fate . . .

Fate could mean many things. The worst was PT, a group punishment that involved push-ups, burpees and six-inch leg raises. Caning – with a cricket wicket, a length of bamboo, a plank – hurt more but was at least over quickly.

Dear Mom and Dad. We have been gated because someone went into his locker before the rising bell, so I cannot go downtown today or next weekend . . . I can't wait till the running is finished. It is hell.

Athletics training at 5.30 a.m. was mandatory for the first month, until the inter-house competition. Then it was swimming, which was even tougher. Afternoons were reserved for team sports. Rugby was compulsory for first- and second-year pupils and not much fun unless you were big for your age or fast. Our opponents from the local Afrikaans schools played with an intensity that suggested revenge for the concentration camps.

In the evenings we walked back to school to do our homework and then checked in on our matric one last time. After lights out the house was finally silent and you could hear the chug of the night trains. One or two boys who still had the energy and guts or were simply incorrigible would risk showing off their bodily talents. Lying on their stomachs with their knees tucked and their naked bottoms high, they would suck in air through their anus and fart loudly. It was a trick only for the confident: in previous years a boy seeking glory expelled a solid instead of a gas. From then on his nickname was Shotgun.

On Sunday mornings we dressed in our school uniforms and boaters and walked to church. There were Anglican and Catholic churches in town but most of us claimed to be Methodists because the service lasted only forty-five minutes. We then had a few hours to kill downtown, though there was not much to do or see.

Even by South African standards, Potchefstroom was a deeply conservative place. The university prohibited social dancing on

campus while Eugène Terre'Blanche's Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging, the Afrikaner resistance movement, or AWB, a paramilitary group that regarded the apartheid government as too liberal, held regular meetings in town, an additional incentive, were any needed, for 'non-whites' to keep to their own areas, which were defined by law.

Beyond the railway line behind Buxton, beyond the industrial area, was the black African location of Ikageng. Coloureds (as people of mixed race are still known in South Africa) had their own township, Promosa, and South Africans of Indian descent lived in Mohadin.

To us these were just names. We never went there, never played sport against their schools and seldom saw their inhabitants. We knew nothing about these people of other races.

The prejudice towards them was blind and entrenched in language. Indians were *currymunchers*, *charras*, *canecutters*, *coolies*. Coloureds were *point-fives*. Black people were *pekkies*, *coons*, *munts*, *zots*, *spoons*, *spades*, *kaffirs*. A boy who chewed with his mouth open or who failed to put on deodorant was reminded of his superior colour: 'White skin!' If a junior was cocky rather than subservient to someone in a higher grade he was accused of 'being white'. Anyone who suggested black people were treated unjustly was a *kaffirboetie*, a *kaffir* brother.

Racial slurs were used by pupils of all ages, among themselves. Teachers did not encourage such language, and seldom, if ever, spoke this way in front of us. But they also made little attempt to stamp it out. It was coarse, macho talk, but it was not simply boys being boys. Many of the children would have first heard these words at home.

Kids with dark skin were often mocked about having mixed blood. One Granton boy in my year was given the nickname Naidoo – a common surname in Indian townships – and a Milton boy was sometimes called Kaffir K. If you had tight curly hair you would be reminded of the 'pencil test'. The apartheid authorities had used this method to determine racial identity: if a pencil pushed into a person's hair did not fall out, he or she was classified as coloured.

In the dining hall we sat at tables of eight, seven boys from the

same year and a matric. He would eat as much as he wanted, with the remaining food passed around anticlockwise. Some table heads would enforce a rule where the boy to his right served himself as much as he liked, which meant the last boy received little or no food. This was called the *kaffir* system, because that's how black people supposedly behaved, with greed and no self-control. In a similar way, a boy who spread too much peanut butter on his bread would be accused of 'going *kaffir*'. Housemasters and teachers frowned on this kind of behaviour but rarely found out about it. 'Spying' – telling someone in authority about wrongdoing – was taboo among the boys.

Several dozen black men and women worked at the school, travelling by bicycle from Ikageng to clean the houses, prepare the sports fields, cook our food. Most were invisible to us or at least to me – to this day I have no recollection of any black women at the school.

The few black staff we regularly came into contact with worked in the dining hall. We called teachers sir or ma'am and older boys by their surnames but the black staff we addressed by their first names. Daniel and Sam, who liked to talk about football; Abe, the quiet, older man with a deep dent in his forehead; Danny *Bosluis* – Danny the tick – who had a bad limp and a perpetual frown.

Since much of the food was unpalatable – liver, overcooked greens, Welsh rarebit – we gorged on bread at mealtimes. When the bread tin was empty one of us would hold it up for a refill. If it were Danny *Bosluis* who approached, the matric would sometimes order the boy to drop the tin just as Danny reached out for it. Clang! The dining hall fell silent and everyone stared at Danny.

The most popular black worker, especially with the younger boys, was Solly, who had a wicked sense of humour and a foul mouth. He rightly called us 'fucking philistines'.

This was what I knew about Solly. He was short and had a very long fingernail on one hand. He owned an old Ford Cortina that he had painted yellow. He never missed a first-team rugby match. He was at ease among whites at the

school, including teachers and parents. He had been given a watch for long service.

These were some of the things I did not know.

Solly was one of twelve siblings. He had four children. He had a primary-school education and spoke six languages. Beyond the school gates he was scared of white people, knowing he could be beaten for no reason and could not retaliate. He especially feared the police, who could be cruel in so many ways. Once, after throwing him in the back of a pickup for breaking the town's 8 p.m. curfew for non-whites, the officers stopped at a corner shop en route to the police station. They put six large jam doughnuts and a big mug of coffee in front of Solly and said he was free to leave if he could finish it all quickly. He tried and he failed and they laughed and laughed and then got bored and said to him: 'Go!'

At the end of my first year several Buxton newboys left the school because they were homesick or unwilling to put up with the bullying. It was the same the following year. By the third year though, school was tolerable, even enjoyable, especially if you liked sport and were content to conform.

When the shower drain blocked and the water overflowed into the communal urinal we no longer had to stamp in the soapy piss to ease the blockage – there were newboys for that. Our fear of matrices was manageable and the main threat of punishment came from the male teachers. The principal took this responsibility especially seriously. In his office he kept a hardcover exercise book that had been passed down by the various heads since 1956 and recorded the name of every boy caned, the number of lashes and the offence.

P.R. 4. Disgraceful behaviour – suggestive language and vulgarity to a girl of a visiting school.

Ĵ.P. 4. Pornographic literature at school. Final warning.

R.B. 4. Drinking liquor.

I.R. 2. Cadets – undisciplined.

Cadets was a mandatory and much-loathed programme at most white secondary schools, overseen by the South African Defence Force. Every Monday we would change into khaki uniforms and march in military formation around the rugby field for an hour. The aim was to boost national pride and forge early loyalty to the armed forces. All white males over seventeen had to report for two years of military service. Some boys had brothers in the army, so we knew what that would entail: patrolling the townships or fighting the covert war in Angola.

There was further indoctrination during veld school, a week-long camp that fifteen-year-old white schoolchildren across the Transvaal attended. An experience that could have been fun – learning bush craft, cooking over fires – was dulled by the propaganda: singing the national anthem every morning while the flag was raised, the lectures about the threat of Satan, communism and, most dangerous of all, the black terrorists.

The only black person I knew well was Isabel Manana. My mother had met Isabel while teaching black men and women to read and write at a church in Johannesburg, and asked if she wanted a job as a housekeeper. The Group Areas Act forbade blacks from living in white-designated urban areas but an exception was made for domestic workers, or ‘maids’ as they were called. And so, when I was seven, Isabel moved into a small self-contained room behind our garage. While my mother was out managing a big supermarket, Isabel washed, vacuumed and ironed. She also made endless pots of tea for my father, a professional carpenter who built everything from kitchens to staircases and electric guitars, and emerged from his workshop several times a day smelling of sawdust and tobacco. But much of Isabel’s time was spent looking after me and my two brothers, cleaning up our mess, settling our disputes, cooking us porridge for breakfast and meatballs with tomato and onion sauce and rice for dinner. We loved her, and gave her hell.

Visiting Isabel in her room one day we noticed that her bed was

raised on bricks. She explained it was for protection against the *tokoloshe*, a dwarf-like creature that attacked its victims at night. We found this hilarious. ‘Isabel, the *tokoloshe* is coming for you,’ we’d say over and over again. She would threaten to beat us, and then join in the laughter. Her bed remained on bricks.

Isabel had six children of her own and every few months one of them would appear at the gate. Freddy and Patricia, the two eldest, were at a distant boarding school. Sharon, Cynthia, Zanele and S’fiso, then just a few years old, lived in KwaNdebele, one of the Bantustans established by the apartheid regime to keep black people far away from the whites. The four of them stayed in a single-bedroom house that Isabel had built. At the end of every month she travelled by taxi and then bus for seven hours to bring them food and money. The separation caused Isabel great pain but there was little choice. The exemption for domestic workers to live in white areas did not apply to their children.

Soon after moving in with us Isabel fell pregnant again. Her husband had never offered her much support previously and now he disappeared. By the time Isabel learned he had taken up with another woman she had given birth to a daughter she named Zandile.

After a long discussion with Isabel my parents decided that the law should be ignored. ‘Zed’, as we took to calling the baby, would stay with Isabel and be raised on our property.

Few College boys followed the goings-on in government, where the National Party had ruled for forty years. One of the only politicians we all knew of was the cantankerous, finger-wagging president, P.W. Botha, known as *die groot krokodil*, the big crocodile, because of his stubbornness and ability to outmanoeuvre opponents.

Then, in 1989, Botha suffered a stroke. In February 1990, the new president, F.W. de Klerk, ordered that Nelson Mandela be released after twenty-seven years in jail, and unbanned the African National Congress. I don’t remember it being a big deal at school, but then there was no reason for it to have been. In history, my favourite

subject, we had studied the rise of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, the Anglo-Boer Wars and twentieth-century national politics – white politics. Black political history was almost entirely absent from the syllabus. This was before the Internet, and in the houses we did not watch television news. Even if we had it would not have made much difference, for broadcasters were restricted to showing what the government approved. The school library only stocked books passed by the censors, and every year a few titles, such as *Mao Tse Tung and the Chinese Communist Revolution*, were stamped CANCELLED and added to the pile of banned literature in the storeroom.

Democratic elections were still four years away and there was no immediate impact on our lives at school or beyond. But it was clear that something had changed. The government's admission that apartheid was wrong had made it acceptable, even fashionable, for white people to echo this publicly.

Towards the end of each year the school prize-giving was held in a lecture hall at the university. The headmaster would make a speech and so would an old boy. In 1989, a few months before Mandela's release, the speakers talked of the dangers of the occult and corruption, but did not mention racial injustice. A year later the old boy told us that we had to accept that there was a 'vast majority of South Africans who have keenly felt grievances and who have benefited very little from the economic growth that took this country to where it is today'. And the headmaster spoke of how the 'cry for freedom' had been heard all over the world.

By then, I was about to start matric. That final year, 1991, I was head boy of Buxton and had my own study and two newboys as my fags. Instead of spending Saturday mornings being forced to watch the first cricket team, I was among the players being applauded from the boundary. A letter from the army arrived saying that I had been called up for duty but I binned it since I planned to go university and students were granted deferrals.

That September, all the parents were asked to vote on the school's future admission policy and 85 per cent of them chose a model where

boys of all races would be allowed to attend. The following January the first non-white boys walked through the gates of College.

Hundreds of other white schools across the country opened their doors to blacks, coloureds and Indians in 1992. For Isabel's six eldest children the change came too late. Black schools had been so starved of resources that most pupils were far behind white boys and girls of the same age.

But Zandile had a chance. She was only eight and had the option of going to Blairgowrie Primary School at the end of our road, which my brothers and I had attended. After an assessment she was accepted, though she had to drop a grade. She quickly caught up academically and excelled at athletics and swimming. In the afternoons she and a classmate whose mother was also a domestic worker would play in our pool.

By the time Zandile started secondary school both my brothers had left home, though I was still there. One day my mother asked Zandile if she wanted to move out of Isabel's room and into a vacant bedroom next to mine, where she would have space to study and could decorate as she pleased. Zandile did not need to be asked twice. It was strange for a week or two, for me and for Zandile, who kept largely to herself. But it soon became normal.

My last trip to College was in August 1993, the day my father died of a heart attack. My mother and I drove through the night to Potchefstroom to fetch my younger brother. I remember the silence and the darkest sky and seeing a shooting star that we agreed was Dad.

Eight months later I voted in the first democratic elections to be held in South Africa. Mandela became president. The struggle against apartheid was over, a struggle that I had never been part of. Had I been born ten or twenty years earlier I would have taken risks, fought the injustice. That's what I told myself back then.

The struggle was not over, though. At the University of the

Witwatersrand, where I was studying, there were occasional disturbances to lectures and protests over the financial and academic exclusion of black school leavers, an issue that has blown up again today. The easy option was to ignore their plight, and I did.

After graduating I joined the accounting firm KPMG, which, like other companies, had suddenly taken in a lot of black trainees in a bid to appear less white. I was friendly with most of the young black men and women in my business unit, but the friendship was never deep. I started to learn Zulu and then took up French instead – there was a world beyond South Africa. At the end of 1999 I quit my job and boarded a plane for London. My plan was to make some quick money, go backpacking and figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I was sure I would be back.

Seventeen years have passed since I left South Africa. I visit each year for a few weeks to see my mother, my brothers, my in-laws. Each time the country feels a little more foreign and the prospect of a permanent return more remote. I have a family now, and my children are English.

After my departure I saw Isabel and Zandile a few times, but only fleetingly. When I called Isabel last summer she said she now lived at her rural home, where her kids grew up, and we arranged to meet there. On a Sunday morning I drove north from Pretoria, into the countryside where cows and ostriches shared fields and two rivers, Elands and Crocodile, ran dry. Soon I was in the former Bantustan of KwaNdebele, which remains a black area. By the roadside churchgoers walked with purpose, women in their blue and white blouses and dresses, men in white trousers and purple blazers. Small shops advertised haircuts, car parts, chicken milk soap and burial services.

Zandile met me in the town of Moteti. We hugged and I told her she looked like a Boer in her silver-grey Chevrolet pickup.

‘You have to be practical, hey!’ she replied.

I followed her to Isabel’s home, along a dirt road. When Isabel ran out of the house laughing with joy, her arms wide open, I burst

into tears. It took several minutes to compose myself. ‘*Hawu*, Xanny, it’s okay my boy,’ Isabel said, arm around me, as we sat in her living room.

Several of Isabel’s children and other relatives had joined us in the living room. They looked on in silence, and with concern, unsure what had happened.

What had brought on the emotion? Was it love? Was it guilt, or shame, at not having kept in closer contact with someone who had been such a big part of my upbringing? This was the first time I had ever visited her home.

Isabel proudly showed me around her house, which now had four bedrooms instead of one. In the kitchen stood a half-barrel of *umqombothi*, a creamy traditional beer, left over from the wedding of Isabel’s fifth-born child Zanele the day before. All around were relics of our old house: two fridges, my late grandmother’s floral tapestry, a wooden seahorse carved by my father, the metal trunk from my College days.

We chatted for a while about the past, the funny and the sad times – the death of her son Freddy and her daughter Patricia, who was murdered in Soweto in the nineties. My mother made several trips to the township with Isabel to try to find Patricia’s remains. The hospital that had treated her refused to say where the body was, to avoid being implicated in her death. There had been a nurses’ strike at the time of Patricia’s admission and she might otherwise have survived her injuries.

‘Don’t write that down, Xanny,’ Isabel said. ‘I don’t want to get into trouble.’

Zandile interjected: ‘Mom, it’s a long time ago. You can’t get into trouble now. Tell your stories.’

Isabel was entrepreneurial – she set up several microbusinesses while working for us – but ultimately the job of a housekeeper for a white family had been her ceiling. Even after finishing school, I never talked to her about apartheid, what she had been denied. I asked her now if she ever felt bitterness about those years of white oppression and the question seemed to catch her off guard. She frowned,

seeming almost angry.

‘No. Shame! Who will I get cross for? The past is gone and it won’t come back again. I don’t have any stress now, Xanny.’

Isabel wanted to make me tea even though there was a water outage in the area. While she tried to find some water, I sat down alone with Zandile, who is now thirty-three, and has a successful career working for an airline in Johannesburg. She had driven down for the wedding with her eight-year-old son. Her siblings S’fiso and Cynthia were also there, and it was clear that Zandile and Cynthia in particular were close. It had not always been so.

The decision to allow Zandile to stay with Isabel had caused resentment among the other children, who felt she was being unfairly favoured. Only recently had the rift repaired, Zandile said. ‘They saw me as privileged, which I was compared to them. But I was the poor kid in a privileged environment.’

Zandile said that as a child she could not understand why she had to move to a ‘white’ school in 1992, away from all her friends, and where she was on occasion called a monkey. Secondary school was better, but she still felt like an outsider. I always assumed Zandile had enjoyed school. So too did my mother, who was deeply saddened when I told her what Zandile said. In the unspoken words between people of different races, back then and perhaps now too, so much was hidden.

In the early afternoon we all posed for a photograph outside Isabel’s house, and then I said goodbye and set off on the long drive to College, past the tabletop mine dumps, Soweto to the right, Lenasia to the left.

The next morning I drove from my hotel on the outskirts of Potchefstroom to the school. The streets were familiar even if the names had changed: Govan Mbeki Avenue, Nelson Mandela Drive, Sol Plaatje Street. The main thoroughfare that led to College was called Dr James Moroka Avenue – a name I did not recognise. Later, when I read up on Moroka, I learned he was a medical doctor who

served as president of the African National Congress between 1949 and 1952. He had earned his degree at the University of Edinburgh, and opened his practice on a farm in the Orange Free State, serving blacks as well as Afrikaners, including some who were spurred to overcome their racial prejudice because they had contracted venereal disease and were too embarrassed to visit their white doctor.

A bitter wind blew and when I arrived at the school a few boys in their striped blazers and ties huddled against a sunlit wall eating quarter-loaves of bread stuffed with chips. The receptionist told me it was break time and directed me to the staffroom, where the teachers were drinking coffee. I spotted John Swanepoel, the deputy headmaster, who twenty-six years earlier had taught me science. He did not have any classes for the rest of the day and agreed to show me around the school.

Behind the staffroom was a smart new lecture theatre. The large bell in the courtyard that was rung to signal the start of class had been replaced by an electronic one, and the metalwork room was now the computer centre, but for the most part the school buildings and fixtures looked just like they had when I left, if a bit more worn. There was the hall, with its high ceilings and the lists of Our Glorious Dead. There was the noticeboard, still displaying the line-ups of the first sporting teams for the boys to memorise.

There was one major change, though. There were hardly any white boys at the school, even though all but two of the thirty or so teachers were still white.

When we sat down in his office, Swanepoel gave me the numbers: out of 468 pupils, five were white. Another fifteen or so were Indian South Africans, or originally from elsewhere in Asia. The rest were coloured or black, including some from other southern African countries.

‘Are we a black school now? I’d say so,’ Swanepoel said. ‘But it’s still recognised as a good school, one of the best in North West province.’

This was true: the son of the province’s premier is a matric and

African National Congress secretary general Gwede Mantashe had recently sent two of his boys to College. There have been insinuations, mostly from white old boys, that standards have fallen, but the matric results from 2015, when 96 per cent of pupils passed and one in two were accepted into university, were virtually unchanged from 1995, when the school was still overwhelmingly white.

Swanepoel suggested we tour the houses, which are now separated by grade to try to prevent bullying by seniors.

In Milton House the matron's office was crowded with boys spreading peanut butter and jam on slices of brown bread for a mid-morning snack, just as we had done.

'Boys, break is cancelled,' Swanepoel said.

'*Hawu*, sir!' the pupils said, alarmed, before realising he was joking.

Buxton, my old house, was awaiting renovations, and had plenty of space, since most College pupils are now day boys. Even so, the bathrooms were unrecognisable: instead of communal showers there were individual stalls, and urinals had replaced the long metal piss trough. The era of stamping to ease blockages was long gone.

Swanepoel knocked on the door of my old study. Hearing no answer, we entered. A head appeared from beneath a duvet. Instead of swotting for exams, which the matrics were writing, the boy had been sleeping.

Swanepoel, an Afrikaner who had served in the army and ran the school's cadet programme in my day, looked disgusted but said nothing. The pupils no longer feared the teachers, and discipline at the school had slipped, he said.

From what I saw and heard at the school Swanepoel was well respected by the boys and his fellow teachers. But his stern manner – a trait even when I was at College – had sometimes led people to wonder about his views. Swanepoel told me that he was once asked by a black pupil whether he was a racist. When he said yes, the boy replied, 'So how can you be here?' And Swanepoel said: 'Because I don't discriminate against anyone based on colour.'

I must have looked confused because he tried to explain.

‘I worry about the future of this country. But I am not this AWB guy who wants to plant bombs. On the street I call a black man sir. If a white boy disrespects me I feel exactly the same as when a black boy does. But if you ask me if I am a racist by heart, I have to say yes. I don’t think there’s a single country in the world where you have more than one race and find no racism.’

Swanepoel’s admission shocked me. Not just what he said, but also his honesty, a brave honesty, I thought. Apartheid had marked him, as it has marked all of us, in different ways. It made me hyper-aware of colour. Even today, a person’s skin tone is the first thing I consciously process when seeing him or her for the first time.

The next morning as I walked across the school quadrangle one of the teachers collared me. Bev Johnson arrived at College in 1993, after I left, but she knew my younger brother. She had heard I was researching a story and seemed concerned that I did not fully understand the history of colonialism and apartheid. ‘We have so much to answer for,’ Johnson said.

Her sense of guilt was as strongly expressed as the denial of it by Swanepoel, a fellow white teacher who had lived in the same town and through the same changes in South Africa and at College since the end of minority rule. Johnson needn’t have worried about expressing her feelings since they chimed with my own. Ever since I left the country I have felt lingering pangs of conscience at having departed without ever helping to heal its wounds. But there was a difference. By teaching at what had become a black school, Johnson *was* trying to play her part, as was Swanepoel. Both could easily have got jobs at schools where most pupils were white, had they wished, or sought employment overseas, as I had done.

Johnson asked me to address her class of first-year pupils, and thrust an exercise book into my hand, suggesting I look at the excellent quality of the work while she prepared her pupils for my talk.

Johnson waved me in to her classroom, the same one where I had

sat twenty-nine years before listening to the art teacher warning that unless we behaved he would hit us *so hard that your eyes will pop out like Smarties*.

‘Boys, stand and say good morning to Mr Rice, who is going to speak to you about his work.’

‘Good morning, sir.’

They listened politely as I explained that I attended College in the whites-only days, now lived in England and was writing a story about how the school had changed. Johnson asked the boys if they had any questions. A few hands shot up.

‘Sir, how does the school compare to when you were here?’

‘How was the food back then, sir?’

‘Sir, were you allowed to visit the girls’ school in your time?’

‘Sir, what were the matrics like?’

‘How many countries have you visited, sir?’

‘Did you have the same uniform as us, sir?’

I answered as best I could, but one left me puzzled.

‘Have you ever been to Derbyshire, sir?’

I looked at Johnson. She smiled and said: ‘His surname is Derbyshire.’

A few of the questions reminded me of the materialism that is so prevalent in South Africa – what was the most expensive watch I’d seen in England, what cars do people drive there – and also of the comfortable backgrounds of some of the pupils.

Though College has an open-admission policy and charges lower fees than the top private schools, its facilities and exam results are far better than the typical government school, especially in the former townships, making it attractive to middle- and upper-class black parents.

More than two decades after Mandela was elected, the state-run education system is in crisis, and the idea of equal opportunities for all remains a distant dream. In my day, the defining factor in determining a child’s prospects was race: College was an elite school because it was a white school. Today it is class. My old school remains

exclusive because many people cannot afford it.

Even so, there are kids there from poor families whose parents or relatives are making big sacrifices to give them a good education.

When the bell rang and the pupils filed out, Johnson asked one of them to stay behind, a serious-looking boy named Tumelo.

‘Tumelo, tell Mr Rice about your parents.’

‘I don’t have any parents, sir.’

He explained that he lived with his grandmother in Promosa, the old coloured township. It was his maths exercise book that I had looked at while I was waiting for the class to be ready.

What had happened to Solomon Mokoena – Solly – the kitchen worker who called us philistines? From the College website I learned that he had retired in 2015 after forty-six years’ service. The headmaster gave me Solly’s mobile number and when I called he told me that he lived in a village about two and a half hours’ drive from the school. The nearest big town was Rustenburg, and we agreed to meet there one morning.

I got lost and was forty-five minutes late. ‘For fuck’s sakes, man!’ Solly said by way of greeting. He looked spry and was dressed as if he was about to drive one of the sports teams to a match: Reebok cap, blue FIRST TEAM HOCKEY tracksuit top, beige trousers. He suggested we talk at the home of his youngest daughter Grace.

Summer Breeze Estate was one of several new smart housing developments on the edge of town. What sorts of people live there? ‘White, black, pink, blue, green – anyone who can afford to,’ Solly said.

Grace, who was born in Potchefstroom when I was at College, was married to a safety officer at a nearby platinum mine. She ribbed her father for getting her birth year wrong – ‘It’s his age, *neh!*’ – and left us alone in the lounge to chat.

Solly explained that he was born in Vredefort, a town in the Orange Free State, where his parents worked for an Afrikaner farmer who kept cattle and grew corn. As the child of a black farmworker, Solly had no opportunity to attend secondary school.

In 1966, when he was sixteen, his father found work on a farm in Potchefstroom and moved his family there. Solly did odd jobs for two years before a friend told him of a house-cleaning position at College. He moved into a ten-bed dormitory in a house in Ikageng, the black township, and cycled through the dark streets to the school at 4 a.m. to shovel coal into the boilers for the showers.

After a few years the headmaster allowed Solly to move into a small room on the College grounds. He married one of the cleaners, Lena, and started a family. They weren't permitted to keep their children at school, which was an officially white area, and so sent them to live in Bophuthatswana, the Bantustan where Solly's parents had moved.

He recounted the story about the police and the doughnuts, and spoke of his fear of the white man during the apartheid days. But he said had never experienced racism at the school, from either the teachers or the pupils. Could that really have been the case, given the way the boys talked among themselves? And if it was not, why didn't he tell me? But what reason would he have to confide in me – someone he probably did not remember from College and who had only looked him up twenty-five years later?

'In my life, from being born until now, the best place was College,' Solly said. A place where he could not live with his kids because of the colour of their skin. 'I went from being a boy to an old man there.'

He had outlasted many of his colleagues. Danny Bosluis, dead. Abe, the sad-looking waiter, dead. Sam, the jovial footballer, dead, Solly told me. There was some continuity, though: his great-nephew Neo was a matric at the school, one of South Africa's 'born free' generation who, unlike their parents, had never known apartheid.

After two hours or so, the conversation dried up and I sensed Solly was a bit bored of telling his story. We ate lunch at a fast-food joint and then set off for Mmatau, his rural village in the former Bophuthatswana, ninety minutes' drive away. I asked if I could get him anything to say thank you for his time and he said 'medicine'. A few miles on he said, 'There's a pharmacy,' and we went inside. He chose a bottle of Richelieu brandy and eight bottles of Carling Black

Label beer. Soon the first empty Carling flew out of Solly's window, smashing by the roadside. He opened up a bit more.

'In the old days I could never have just walked into that shop and bought brandy. We were not allowed inside a liquor store: I would have had to ask a white to go in for me.

'Ag, it was a bad time.'

As we neared Mmatau the terrain became ever more harsh, with rocky hills and thorn trees. The tarmac road gave way to dirt. Solly's small house stood in the middle of a large plot of red sand. Several of his relatives were enjoying the late-afternoon sun around the back.

While no one was looking, Solly took the remaining beers and the brandy bottle inside and hid them. The sun was about to set and the road conditions would be hazardous because of the potholes, animals crossing and the aggressive driving of other motorists. Solly asked me to phone him when I reached my hotel that night so he could be sure I'd arrived safely. I forgot and so he called me. I felt bad when I picked up, but he did not want an apology, just to know that I was okay. Still looking after his boys.

The politician Julius Malema – the one who promised **FLUSHING TOILETS FOR ALL** on the squatter camp billboard – said recently that he knew democracy was working when homeless whites begged him for money. By that measure, South Africa *is* more democratic than when I lived there. In Rustenburg, white men guarded vehicles in parking lots for tips. Outside a supermarket in Potchefstroom, a young Afrikaner asked me to buy him a pie because he was hungry.

Filling up my car with petrol near the school one afternoon, I was approached by a black man who asked if I would buy a sponge or a cloth from him for fifteen rand. I bought a cloth.

Then an older white man with a sun-scarred face came to my window and pushed a pen into my hand. Twenty rand, he said. While I was taking the money out of my wallet he dropped a second pen on my lap. Buy two, he said.

I was angry – rather than being grateful, he was aggressive. But it

was more than that. I felt less sorry for the white man. He had enjoyed the benefits of apartheid and had blown it. Of course this was unfair – there were poor whites under apartheid, and who knew what had happened to this man to put him in the situation he was. But my instinct dictated otherwise.

A related impulse influences my behaviour in shops and restaurants whenever I visit South Africa. I am extra polite and friendly to black workers, making jokes, saying multiple thank-yous. Trying to connect in some way. Ordering lunch at a takeaway burger joint in Potchefstroom, I chatted to the black woman cashier while the other customers – a father and son built like oxen and wearing rugby shorts and khaki shirts, a middle-aged woman straight from the hair salon – stood silently waiting for their food. In the cashier's face I sensed a slight unease at my attempts at conversation: it was the sort of look a tourist in a foreign land receives when he talks too loudly or asks the wrong question.

Maybe that's what I am now: a foreigner with a local accent.

During mid-morning break one day three boys walked over for a chat. They were good sportsmen, a hockey player, a cricketer and a rugby player. We talked about the excellent facilities: the immaculate cricket and rugby fields with inbuilt sprinkler systems, the cricket bowling machines, the gym, the renovated squash courts. The hockey player wondered if the school would ever get an AstroTurf pitch, like some of the bigger schools. Then he changed the subject.

'Sir, do you think white boys will ever come back?'

I said I was not sure, and asked if it mattered.

'It does, sir. We need them. It will help with our language.'

Most of the black pupils speak Setswana at home and when chatting to their friends at school. But it was not an exam subject – English and Afrikaans remain the two compulsory languages in the South African education system.

Unlike the paucity of black teachers, which none of the pupils raised with me as an issue, the absence of white pupils greatly concerned the College boys. The previous day outside Bev Johnson's class another pupil had asked me a similar question about the possible return of white kids in big numbers.

Johnson had tried to explain to him why this was unlikely. First, only 10 per cent of South Africans are white, she said. Second, the school was now expensive for boarders (in my day, fees were very low), and most white pupils had historically stayed in the houses because they lived outside Potchefstroom.

Furthermore, white English-speaking people with the means were also increasingly choosing private schools for their children.

I was still thinking about what the boys had said about white pupils when I went to the town library to do research and make photocopies that afternoon.

A smartly dressed young black man was in charge of the computer and copy centre. It turned out he was also a College old boy. Oatile Sitase told me that he started at the school in 2004, when it was still racially diverse. His friendship circle included two black boys, two white boys and two Chinese. 'Even today we still talk and have braais. They are my eyes and I am their eyes in terms of jobs,' he said.

While reading I had noticed a black boy, a coloured boy and a white boy sitting at a table doing their homework together. Now, on leaving the library, I saw a chunky blond teenager and a thin black kid of a similar age walking down the street, laughing and chatting. Both boys wore the uniform of Volkies, a local Afrikaans school. As I watched them I felt a dull ache develop in my chest. I was physically heartsore: filled with envy, sadness, anger at opportunities denied, missed.

And I suddenly understood what the black boys had been saying about wanting white boys at College. It was not really about language or the perception of the school. It was about not being apart. ■