

Reading

"Chameleon" from *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*

By Trevor Noah

Nearly one million people lived in Soweto. Ninety-nine point nine percent of them were black—and then there was me. I was famous in my neighborhood just because of the color of my skin. I was so unique people would give directions using me as a landmark. “The house on Makhalima Street. At the corner you’ll see a light-skinned boy. Take a right there.”

Whenever the kids in the street saw me they’d yell, “*Indoda yomlungu!*” “The white man!” Some of them would run away. Others would call out to their parents to come look. Others would run up and try to touch me to see if I was real. It was **pandemonium**¹. What I didn’t understand at the time was that the other kids genuinely had no clue what a white person was. Black kids in the **township**² didn’t leave the township. Few people had televisions. They’d seen the white police roll through, but they’d never dealt with a white person face to face, ever.

As a kid I understood that people were different colors, but in my head white and black and brown were like types of chocolate. Dad was the white chocolate, Mom was the dark chocolate, and I was the milk chocolate. But we were all just chocolate. I didn’t know any of it had anything to do with “race.” I didn’t know what race was. My mother never referred to my dad as white or to me as mixed. So when the other kids in Soweto called me “white,” even though I was light brown, I just thought they had their colors mixed up, like they hadn’t learned them properly.

I soon learned that the quickest way to bridge the race gap was through language. Soweto was a melting pot: families from different tribes and homelands. Most kids in the township spoke only their home language, but I learned several languages because I grew up in a house where there was no option but to learn them. My mom made sure English was the first language I spoke. If you’re black in South Africa, speaking English is the only thing that can give you a leg up. English is the language of money. English comprehension is equated with intelligence. If you’re looking for a job, English is the difference between getting the job or staying unemployed. If

¹ **pandemonium:** chaos

² **township:** a racially segregated residential area in South Africa during apartheid. There were separate townships for Black, colored, and Indian South Africans.

you're **standing in the dock**³, English is the difference between getting off with a fine or going to prison.

After English, Xhosa was what we spoke around the house. When my mother was angry she'd fall back on her home language. As a naughty child, I was well versed in Xhosa threats. They were the first phrases I picked up, mostly for my own safety—phrases like "*Ndiza kubetha entloko.*" "I'll knock you upside the head." Or "*Sidenge ndini somntwana.*" "You idiot of a child." It's a very passionate language. Outside of that, my mother picked up different languages here and there. She learned Zulu because it's similar to Xhosa. She spoke German because of my father. She spoke Afrikaans because it is useful to know the language of your oppressor. Sotho she learned in the streets. Living with my mom, I saw how she used language to cross boundaries, handle situations, navigate the world. We were in a shop once, and the shopkeeper, right in front of us, turned to his security guard and said, in Afrikaans, "*Volg daai swartes, netnou steel hulle iets.*" "Follow those blacks in case they steal something."

My mother turned around and said, in beautiful, fluent Afrikaans, "*Hoekom volg jy nie daai swartes sodat jy hulle kan help kry waarna hulle soek nie?*" "Why don't you follow these blacks so you can help them find what they're looking for?"

"*Ag, jammer!*" he said, apologizing in Afrikaans. Then—and this was the funny thing—he didn't apologize for being racist; he merely apologized for aiming his racism at us. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "I thought you were like the other blacks. You know how they love to steal."

I learned to use language like my mother did. I would simulcast—give you the program in your own tongue. I'd get suspicious looks from people just walking down the street. "Where are you from?" they'd ask. I'd reply in whatever language they'd addressed me in, using the same accent that they used. There would be a brief moment of confusion, and then the suspicious look would disappear. "Oh, okay. I thought you were a stranger. We're good then."

It became a tool that served me my whole life. One day as a young man I was walking down the street, and a group of Zulu guys was walking behind me, closing in on me, and I could hear them talking to one another about how they were going to mug me. "*Asibambe le autie yomlungu. Phuma ngapha mina ngizoqhamuka ngemuva kwakhe.*" "Let's get this white guy. You go to his left, and I'll come up behind him." I didn't know what to do. I couldn't run, so I just spun around real quick and said, "*Kodwa bajwethu yingani singavele sibambe umuntu inkunzi? Asenzeni. Mina ngikulindele.*" "Yo, guys, why don't we just mug someone together? I'm ready. Let's do it."

They looked shocked for a moment, and then they started laughing. "Oh, sorry, dude. We thought you were something else. We weren't trying to take anything from you. We were trying

³ **standing in the dock:** on trial in a courtroom

to steal from white people. Have a good day, man.” They were ready to do me violent harm, until they felt we were part of the same tribe, and then we were cool. That, and so many other smaller incidents in my life, made me realize that language, even more than color, defines who you are to people.

I became a chameleon. My color didn’t change, but I could change your perception of my color. I didn’t look like you, but if I spoke like you, I was you.

As apartheid was coming to an end, South Africa’s **elite**⁴ private schools started accepting children of all colors. My mother’s company offered scholarships for underprivileged families, and she managed to get me into Maryvale College, an expensive private Catholic school. Classes taught by nuns. Mass on Fridays. The whole bit. I started preschool there when I was three, primary school when I was five.

In my class we had all kinds of kids. Black kids, white kids, Indian kids, colored kids. Most of the white kids were pretty well off. Every child of color pretty much wasn’t. But because of scholarships we all sat at the same table. We wore the same maroon blazers, the same gray slacks and skirts. We had the same books. We had the same teachers. There was no racial separation. Every **clique**⁵ was racially mixed.

Kids still got teased and bullied, but it was over usual kid stuff: being fat or being skinny, being tall or being short, being smart or being dumb. I don’t remember anybody being teased about their race. I didn’t learn to put limits on what I was supposed to like or not like. I had a **wide berth to explore myself**⁶.

I had crushes on white girls. I had crushes on black girls. Nobody asked me what I was. I was Trevor.

It was a wonderful experience to have, but the downside was that it sheltered me from reality. Maryvale was an **oasis**⁷ that kept me from the truth, a comfortable place where I could avoid making a tough decision. But the real world doesn’t go away. Racism exists. People are getting hurt, and just because it’s not happening to you doesn’t mean it’s not happening. And at some point, you have to choose. Black or white. Pick a side. You can try to hide from it. You can say, “Oh, I don’t pick sides,” but at some point life will force you to pick a side.

At the end of grade six I left Maryvale to go to H. A. Jack Primary, a government school. I had to take an aptitude test before I started, and, based on the results of the test, the school

⁴ **elite**: privileged or exclusive

⁵ **clique**: group of people with similar interests, backgrounds, or social status. Cliques can be exclusive.

⁶ **“Wide berth to explore myself”**: freedom to explore my identity and interests

⁷ **oasis**: a retreat or an ideal place

counselor told me, "You're going to be in the smart classes, the A classes." I showed up for the first day of school and went to my classroom. Of the thirty or so kids in my class, almost all of them were white. There was one Indian kid, maybe one or two black kids, and me.

Then recess came. We went out on the playground, and black kids were everywhere. It was an ocean of black, like someone had opened a tap and all the black had come pouring out. I was like, *Where were they all hiding?* The white kids I'd met that morning, they went in one direction, the black kids went in another direction, and I was left standing in the middle, totally confused. I did not understand what was happening.

I was eleven years old, and it was like I was seeing my country for the first time. In the townships you don't see segregation, because everyone is black. In the white world, any time my mother took me to a white church, we were the only black people there, and my mom didn't separate herself from anyone. She didn't care. She'd go right up and sit with the white people. And at Maryvale, the kids were mixed up and hanging out together. Before that day, I had never seen people being together and yet not together, occupying the same space yet choosing not to associate with each other in any way. In an instant I could see, I could feel, how the boundaries were drawn. Groups moved in color patterns across the yard, up the stairs, down the hall. It was insane. I looked over at the white kids I'd met that morning. Ten minutes earlier I'd thought I was at a school where they were a majority. Now I realized how few of them there actually were.

I stood there awkwardly by myself in this no-man's-land in the middle of the playground. Luckily, I was rescued by the Indian kid from my class, a guy named Theesan Pillay. Theesan was one of the few Indian kids in school, so he'd noticed me, another obvious outsider, right away. He ran over to introduce himself. "Hello, fellow **anomaly**⁸! You're in my class. Who are you? What's your story?" We started talking and hit it off. He took me under his wing, **the Artful Dodger to my bewildered Oliver**⁹.

Throughout conversation it came up that I spoke several African languages, and Theesan thought a colored kid speaking black languages was the most amazing trick. He brought me over to a group of black kids. "Say something," he told them, "and he'll show you he understands you." One kid said something in Zulu, and I replied to him in Zulu. Everyone cheered. Another kid said something in Xhosa, and I replied to him in Xhosa. Everyone cheered. For the rest of recess Theesan took me around to different black kids on the playground. "Show them your trick. Do your language thing."

⁸ **anomaly**: oddity

⁹ "**The Artful Dodger to my bewildered Oliver**": someone who is skilled at avoiding trouble or getting away with mischievous behavior (referencing characters in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*)

The black kids were fascinated. It wasn't common to find a white or colored person who spoke African languages. The fact that I did speak them immediately endeared me to the black kids.

"How come you speak our languages?" they asked.

"Because I'm black," I said, "like you."

"You're not black."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're not. Have you not seen yourself?"

They were confused at first. Because of my color, they thought I was a colored person, but speaking the same languages meant that I belonged to their tribe. It just took them a moment to figure it out. It took me a moment, too.

At some point I turned to one of them and said, "Hey, how come I don't see you guys in any of my classes?" It turned out they were in the B classes, which also happened to be the black classes. That same afternoon, I went back to the A classes, and by the end of the day I realized that they weren't for me. Suddenly, I knew who my people were, and I wanted to be with them. I went to see the school counselor.

"I'd like to switch over," I told her. "I'd like to go to the B classes."

She was confused. "Oh, no," she said. "I don't think you want to do that."

"Why not?"

"Because those kids are ... you know."

"No, I don't know. What do you mean?"

"Look," she said, "you're a smart kid. You don't want to be in that class."

"But aren't the classes the same? English is English. Math is math."

"Yeah, but ... those kids are gonna hold you back."

"But surely there must be some smart kids in the B class."

"No, there aren't."

"But all my friends are there."

"You don't want to be friends with those kids."

"Yes, I do."

We went back and forth. Finally she gave me a stern warning.

"You do realize the effect this will have on your future? You do understand what you're giving up? This will impact the opportunities you'll have open to you for the rest of your life."

"I'll take that chance."

I moved to the B classes with the black kids. I decided I'd rather be held back with people I liked than move ahead with people I didn't know.

Being at H. A. Jack made me realize I was black. Before that recess I'd never had to choose, but when I was forced to choose, I chose black. The world saw me as colored, but I didn't spend my life looking at myself. I spent my life looking at other people. I saw myself as the people around me, and the people around me were black. My cousins are black, my mom is black, my gran is black. I grew up black. Because I had a white father, because I'd been in white Sunday school, I got along with the white kids, but I didn't belong with the white kids. I wasn't a part of their tribe. But the black kids embraced me. With the black kids, I wasn't constantly trying to be. With the black kids, I just was.

Credit Line:

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