# **Excerpt: Trevor Noah’s “Born a Crime”**

We waited and waited for a minibus to come by. Under apartheid the government provided no public transportation for blacks, but white people still needed us to show up to mop their floors and clean their bathrooms. Necessity being the mother of invention, black people created their own transit system, an informal network of bus routes, controlled by private associations operating entirely outside the law. Because the minibus business was completely unregulated, it was basically organized crime. Different groups ran different routes, and they would fight over who controlled what. There was bribery and general shadiness that went on, a great deal of violence, and a lot of protection money paid to avoid violence. The one thing you didn’t do was steal a route from a rival group. Drivers who stole routes would get killed. Being unregulated, minibuses were also very unreliable. When they came, they came. When they didn’t, they didn’t.

Standing outside Rosebank Union, I was literally falling asleep on my feet. Not a minibus in sight. Eventually my mother said, “Let’s hitchhike.” We walked and walked, and after what felt like an eternity, a car drove up and stopped. The driver offered us a ride, and we climbed in. We hadn’t gone ten feet when suddenly a minibus swerved right in front of the car and cut us off.

A Zulu driver got out with an *iwisa*, a large, traditional Zulu weapon -- a war club, basically. They’re used to smash people’s skulls in. Another guy, his crony, got out of the passenger side. They walked up to the driver’s side of the car we were in, grabbed the man who’d offered us a ride, pulled him out, and started shoving their clubs in his face. “Why are you stealing our customers? Why are you picking people up?”

It looked like they were going to kill this guy. I knew that happened sometimes. My mom spoke up. “Hey, listen, he was just helping me. Leave him. We’ll ride with you. That’s what we wanted in the first place.” So we got out of the first car and climbed into the minibus.

We were the only passengers in the minibus. In addition to being violent gangsters, South African minibus drivers are notorious for complaining and haranguing passengers as they drive. This driver was a particularly angry one. As we rode along, he started lecturing my mother about being in a car with a man who was not her husband. My mother didn’t suffer lectures from strange men. She told him to mind his own business, and when he heard her speaking in Xhosa, that really set him off. The stereotypes of Zulu and Xhosa women were as ingrained as those of the men. Zulu women were well-behaved and dutiful. Xhosa women were promiscuous and unfaithful. And here was my mother, his tribal enemy, a Xhosa woman alone with two small children -- one of them a mixed child, no less. Not just a whore but a whore who sleeps with white men. “Oh, you’re a *Xhosa*,” he said. “That explains it. Climbing into strange men’s cars. Disgusting woman.”

My mom kept telling him off and he kept calling her names, yelling at her from the front seat, wagging his finger in the rearview mirror and growing more and more menacing until finally he said, “That’s the problem with you Xhosa women. You’re all sluts -- and tonight you’re going to learn your lesson.”

He sped off. He was driving fast, and he wasn’t stopping, only slowing down to check for traffic at the intersections before speeding through. Death was never far away from anybody back then. At that point my mother could be raped. We could be killed. These were all viable options. I didn’t fully comprehend the danger we were in at the moment; I was so tired that I just wanted to sleep. Plus my mom stayed very calm. She didn’t panic, so I didn’t know to panic. She just kept trying to reason with him.

“I’m sorry if we’ve upset you, *bhuti*. You can just let us out here -- “

“No.”

“Really, it’s fine. We can just walk -- “

“No.”

He raced along Oxford Road, the lanes empty, no other cars out. I was sitting closest to the minibus’s sliding door. My mother sat next to me, holding baby Andrew. She looked out the window at the passing road and then leaned over to me and whispered, “Trevor, when he slows down at the next intersection, I’m going to open the door and we’re going to jump.”

I didn’t hear a word of what she was saying, because by that point I’d completely nodded off. When we came to the next traffic light, the driver eased off the gas a bit to look around and check the road. My mother reached over, pulled the sliding door open, grabbed me, and threw me out as far as she could. Then she took Andrew, curled herself in a ball around him, and leaped out behind me.

It felt like a dream until the pain hit. *Bam!* I smacked hard on the pavement. My mother landed right beside me and we tumbled and tumbled and rolled and rolled. I was wide awake now. I went from half asleep to *What the hell?!* Eventually I came to a stop and pulled myself up, completely disoriented. I looked around and saw my mother, already on her feet. She turned and looked at me and screamed.

“Run!”

So I ran, and she ran, and nobody ran like me and my mom.

It’s weird to explain, but I just knew what to do. It was animal instinct, learned in a world where violence was always lurking and waiting to erupt. In the townships, when the police came swooping in with their riot gear and armored cars and helicopters, I knew: *Run for cover. Run and hide.* I knew that as a five-year-old. Had I lived a different life, getting thrown out of a speeding minibus might have fazed me. I’d have stood there like an idiot, going, “What ‘s happening, Mom? Why are my legs so sore?” But there was none of that. Mom said “run,” and I ran. Like the gazelle runs from the lion, I ran.

The men stopped the minibus and got out and tried to chase us, but they didn’t stand a chance. We smoked them. I think they were in shock. I still remember glancing back and seeing them give up with a look of utter bewilderment on their faces. *What just happened? Who’d have thought a woman with two small children could run so fast?* They didn’t know they were dealing with the reigning champs of the Maryvale College sports day. We kept going and going until we made it to a twenty-four-hour petrol station and called the police. By then the men were long gone.

I still didn’t know why any of this had happened; I’d been running on pure adrenaline. Once we stopped running I realized how much pain I was in. I looked down, and the skin on my arms was scraped and torn. I was cut up and bleeding all over. Mom was, too. My baby brother was fine, though, incredibly. My mom had wrapped herself around him, and he’d come through without a scratch. I turned to her in shock.

“What was *that?!* Why are we running?!”

“What do you mean, ‘Why are we running?’ Those men were trying to kill us.”

“You never told me that! You just threw me out of the car!”

“I did tell you. Why didn’t you jump?”

“Jump?! I was asleep!”

“So I should have left you there for them to kill you?”

“At least they would have woken me up before they killed me.” Back and forth we went. I was too confused and too angry about getting thrown out of the car to realize what had happened. My mother had saved my life.

As we caught our breath and waited for the police to come and drive us home, she said, “Well, at least we’re safe, thank God.”

But I was nine years old and I knew better. I wasn’t going to keep quiet this time.

“No, Mom! This was *not* thanks to God! You should have listened to God when he told us to stay at home when the car wouldn’t start, because clearly the Devil tricked us into coming out tonight.”

“No, Trevor! That’s not how the Devil works. This is part of God’s plan, and if He wanted us here then He had a reason ...”

And on and on and there we were, back at it, arguing about God’s will. Finally I said, “Look, Mom. I know you love Jesus, but maybe next week you could ask him to meet us at our house. Because this really wasn’t a fun night.”

She broke out in a huge smile and started laughing. I started laughing, too, and we stood there, this little boy and his mom, our arms and legs covered in blood and dirt, laughing together through the pain in the light of a petrol station on the side of the road in the middle of the night.

 Apartheid was perfect racism. It took centuries to develop, starting all the way back in 1652 when the Dutch East India Company landed at the Cape of Good Hope and established a trading colony, Kaapstad, later known as Cape Town, a rest stop for ships traveling between Europe and India. To impose white rule, the Dutch colonists went to war with the natives, ultimately developing a set of laws to subjugate and enslave them. When the British took over the Cape Colony, the descendants of the original Dutch settlers trekked inland and developed their own language, culture, and customs, eventually becoming their own people, the Afrikaners -- the white tribe of Africa.

The British abolished slavery in name but kept it in practice. They did so because, in the mid-1800s, in what had been written off as a near-worthless way station on the route to the Far East, a few lucky capitalists stumbled upon the richest gold and diamond reserves in the world, and an endless supply of expendable bodies was needed to go in the ground and get it all out.

As the British Empire fell, the Afrikaner rose up to claim South Africa as his rightful inheritance. To maintain power in the face of the country’s rising and restless black majority, the government realized they needed a newer and more robust set of tools. They set up a formal commission to go out and study institutionalized racism all over the world. They went to Australia. They went to the Netherlands. They went to America. They saw what worked, what didn’t. Then they came back and published a report, and the government used that knowledge to build the most advanced system of racial oppression known to man.

Apartheid was a police state, a system of surveillance and laws designed to keep black people under total control. A full compendium of those laws would run more than three thousand pages and weigh approximately ten pounds, but the general thrust of it should be easy enough for any American to understand. In America you had the forced removal of the native onto reservations coupled with slavery followed by segregation. Imagine all three of those things happening to the same group of people at the same time. That was apartheid.

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