

The Escarpment's Edge (Part Two) – by Brian Binyamin Meyer

Shrill rings from the phone pierce the Sunday evening calm.

Theodore jumps at the unexpected sound. He lifts the heavy black receiver to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Long distance call from Pilgrim's Rest," the switchboard operator announces.
"Connection going through"

The line is crystal clear, Theodore thinks to himself, but his heart skips a beat. Why is Mah phoning just the day after getting back to Pilgrim's Rest from Johannesburg? What has caused her to go all the way to the post office in Uptown, book a call, and then wait at least two hours for it to go through.

He hears the familiar click, but no words come down the line. Instead, there is a choking sound then a keen wail, the one he heard Mah emit on the night that Pah passed.

"Mah? Mah?"

Granny Ella is in the kitchen kneading dough for bulkala. She hears the urgency in his voice. Dusting her hands quickly on her apron, she comes through to the entrance hall.

"What's all gone?" Theodore asks, perplexed.

He's as white as a sheet when he returns the receiver to its cradle.

"They've been robbed," he turns to Granny Ella. "Sometime while we were all sitting shiva here in Johannesburg. Or the week after before they went back. Completely cleaned out. There's nothing left in the shop."

"*Gevalt! Oy Gott!*" Granny Ella throws her arms up in the air. She is left speechless. She shakes her head in dismay and goes back to the kitchen. She attacks the dough, pounding rather than kneading; news of the robbery has thrown her mind into a turmoil of thoughts. Wretched memories, usually so carefully tucked away in remote corners of her brain, come rushing forward; Lithuania and Russia during and after the Great War, more than two decades ago when they were expelled from their home and then robbed and beaten and cheated. She shakes her head. No. This is not the same. This is bad luck, and lives are not at stake. She pushes these soul-searing memories back into dormancy. Instead, she concentrates fully on working with the reduced quality of the flour. She knows how lucky they all are, not having food rationing as in England. Yet still, now she cannot temper her annoyance at having to use coarser, unsifted flour. And what of the butcher just yesterday where she couldn't get the cut of meat she wanted. She folds the dough over and under and sideways. Her *bulkala* and bagels are not the same as they were before the war. And who ever heard of brown sugar for *kichel*? For a moment these thoughts veil her distress over the robbery.

Theodore comes into the kitchen. "It must have been an inside job," he says. "Mah says from the outside you can hardly see there's been a break-in. Which is probably why no one phoned or telegraphed to tell her."

For Pah's funeral and the seven days of mourning after, Theodore had received

special dispensation to be absent from school. Now he once again asks the headmaster for another few days' leave.

The headmaster is not an unfeeling man, but does not quite see how further absence could be of benefit.

"You are in your final year of high school," he says. "Matric is difficult enough and important enough not to miss ANY days."

He pauses, then goes on to say, "and I am aware you would like to study medicine at the university. You know as well as I do how important the best marks you can get, are."

Theodore agrees, then adds: "But it would be of great help to my mother, for me to be there with her, to give her support. And I have heard now that the war is over, enlisted men will soon demobilize and priority be given to returning soldiers wanting to study at university."

"Yes," the headmaster says, "this is true. But not a reason to give up hope." He studies Theodore's expression for a few seconds, then continues. "You have a younger brother here with us too, correct?" He looks through the file. "Ah, yes. Hugh," he says, lacing his fingers together and placing his hands on the open file. He hunches forward slightly. "Hugh is not in matric. Perhaps he could go and help your mother for a few days, instead of you?" and he raises his eyebrows in question.

But Theodore shakes his head. "I'm sorry Sir, but no, Hugh wouldn't really know what to do. It would be best that I go".

The headmaster cocks his head to the left, then straightens up to look directly at Theodore for a moment. "Very well," he decides, "you may have another two days. Then I expect you back at school with your full attention!"

Theodore stands. He nods briefly and says: "Thank you, sir. Very much."

And so it was that Theodore returns to Pilgrim's. He has not been back for some years now; Pah, continually unwell, had been more in hospital than out. On the few occasions when discharged, Pah had stayed with his father in Fordsburg, a journey short and easy from Johannesburg's General Hospital in Hillbrow. "More important that you visit Pah," Mah had said during this difficult time, "than visiting us in Pilgrim's."

He decides to miss school on that Thursday and Friday. That way, he will have four full days with Mah and Bertie. He'll take the Sunday-night train back and do his best not to fall asleep during lessons on Monday.

He packs a small bag and early Wednesday evening waits on Market Street for the tram into town. He climbs the stairs to the upper level and sits on the right. From here he can see the ever-changing skyline of the city center. Traffic is light and the tram is not full. The conductor comes upstairs and clips a journey on his 4/6d tram voucher book.

With a confident spring he hops off at the Eloff Street stop, not waiting for the tram to come to a complete stop. He can walk to the station, from here, but spots another tram that will bring him closer. Yet he hesitates before boarding. Does he really want to use another 3d coupon from his 18-ride voucher book? No, he decides. Unnecessary. He'd rather treat himself at one of the numerous sweet-vending kiosks in the station concourse.

He swings his bag over his shoulder and continues down Eloff. It's all of seven blocks to Park Station and he has time for window shopping on the way. He never tires of the multitude of shops in the city center. He's amused by a momentary thought of the time it took him to acclimate from country to city. He's now as confident as all those city-bred school peers, who overwhelmed him at the beginning. He's even proud of having grown up in the country. But he's a city-boy now!

The station's high arched brick entrance is already visible from Jeppe Street, and from there he briskly walks the remaining three blocks. He crosses over Plein Street and is just half a block to the station entrance on de Villiers when a high-pitched screeching followed instantly with a boom stops him in his tracks. He turns in shock at the sound of yelling and shouting and draws in a sharp breath at the sight of an overturned tram lying on its side. A crowd has instantly surrounded the wreck. Young men clamber up to rescue passengers trapped inside. He takes a step towards the scene, but then stops and considers. There is nothing he can do to help. And there are far too many people there already. He turns back towards the station. "I'm never going on a tram again," he thinks. But he barely finishes the thought and knows that's an impractical decision; he needs the tram to get to school in Jeppestown, every day. Shaken, he also knows he cannot waste the rides he still has in the voucher book.

Before crossing de Villiers, he looks up at the three sculptured elephant heads embellishing the station entrance. He studies the frieze above the heads, showing the history of travel down the ages. Beginning with walking figures, bearing bales of goods, the sculpture progresses leftwards to show a six-oxen-team pulling an ox wagon, then a five-team set of prancing horses hauling a stagecoach. The frieze aptly ends with a train and engine. He grins, thinking there's discrimination against buses, cars and trams!

He crosses over. Still shaken by the toppled tram, he suddenly feels unsteady, and takes the twenty stairs down onto the station concourse with care.

The place is busy but the noise is absorbed by the cavernous height of the concourse, its roof supported by towering arched red marble pillars. He weaves his way through the crowds, acutely aware of the many soldiers in uniform. If the war had continued, he thinks, I would have been in those boots as early as next year.

From one of kiosks selling all sorts of ware, from newspapers and magazines to cigarettes, sweets and pastries, he chooses a sugared hot-cross bun.

He joins the queue to buy his ticket. The Pierneef paintings adorning all four walls of the concourse always get his attention. His two favorites are the one showing the Cape Dutch house nestled below the towering mountains of the Franschoek area and the other, with its sand-coloured bridge and red-roofed houses, could easily be Pilgrim's.

He buys his ticket and joins the tightly packed throng of people craning their necks upwards towards the notice board over the subway opening, the subterranean passage leaving to the platforms. His train is on time.

Carefully folding the packet holding his hot cross bun, he is swallowed by the gaping subway entrance and is swept along like a pebble in a river's current towards the platforms. He passes platforms 1 and 2, full of commuters waiting to ride home to towns on the West or East Rand. His train will leave from platform four. A few people are standing about, and he sits himself down on a bench. The oil from the bun has

seeped through the thick brown paper and he opens the packet gingerly so as not to soil his school uniform, which he is wearing so that all those soldiers and adult civilians won't think him a shirker.

He boards immediately the train arrives, and finds a compartment to himself. But at the last minute two beefy soldiers barge in. They swing their bulging duffel bags onto the rack overhead and sit down heavily and with satisfaction. He feels in awe of both their size and uniform.

"Playing truant, are we?" one says, leaning over with a pretend swipe at Theodore's knee.

"I'm not bunking," Theodore reddens. He's intimidated by these two strapping fellows. He'd like to stand up and change compartments, but his legs won't work.

He'd also like to ask them about the War, but his brain seems to have deserted him too. He sits back, upright and silent.

"Hey, sonny" the soldier softens his tone, "only joking hey." He smiles and winks, then stretches his legs out and says "time to catch some kip".

The other follows suit and within a few minutes they're both out for the count. The silence of the compartment is replaced with the sound of deep breathing.

Theodore can now study their uniform insignia unabashedly. He'd like to close the windows; he already feels dirty from the unseen soot the steam engine is puff-puffing out at a steady rate. But the legs of the truant-accusing soldier are now stretched out in both directions, blocking the way.

After a few minutes of contemplation, he takes the chance of disturbing the military men, and, climbing over the outstretched legs, reaches out to close both windows. Then, back in his place, stares out as the day disappears into the darkening dusk.

The soldiers get off at Belfast. As if bidden by instinct, they wake just minutes before the stop.

Heaving their duffel bags onto their shoulders, they throw a "Cheers, hey," at Theodore, "sorry we weren't better company. Where'r you going?"

"Nelspruit." He doesn't add 'and then to Graskop and after that, Pilgrim's Rest'. It seems superfluous, and would they really care?

"Ah, you've still got quite a ride ahead of you," the beefy soldier says. He digs into his bag and brings out a pack of sandwiches. "Here you go," he says. "Army rations. Thank the Lord that's the closest you're gonna get to the *weermag*."

Theodore wants to say thank-you, but instead blurts out facts from a geography lesson: "Belfast is six thousand and forty feet above sea level and is the highest and coldest town in South Africa"

The soldiers stare at him for a moment, then they both laugh and the ration-bearer says, "So it is. *En ons mense* have the warmest hearts."

Theodore picks up the sandwich package only after the train pulls out of Belfast. Staring at the label, he knows it's not kosher but is fiercely tempted to tear

through the paper and taste its contents. He's hungry enough. And it wouldn't be the first time he's tasted *treif*. And, even better, he's here alone. Well, not completely alone; it will be between him and God. Although he's doubtful about God, after what has just happened to the Jews in Europe.

Mah has told him more than once that she can no longer watch sunsets; the pink and reddish hues the sinking sun throws out over the darkening day have become, for her, the world's blood stains of our European brethren, and she needs no extra reminders of the tragedy that has befallen them all. *Gott sedanken* they left after the first war. *Gott sedanken* they had a place to come to. Thanks be to God.

He eats the sandwiches.

Night settles in before they reach Nelspruit, and when he slides the window down his reflection in the glass is replaced with the glory of the star-filled universe.

He hears the conductor moving down the corridor, announcing ten minutes to Nelspruit. His compartment door slides open and the conductor leans in: "Half an hour wait and change platforms to Graskop." The door slides closed and the ten-minutes-to-Nelspruit announcement reverberates again through the corridor.

He arrives late in Graskop. It's been arranged that he stay over at the Levy household and in the morning will get a lift to Pilgrim's.

There's still no electricity in Graskop homes. Mrs. Levy gives him a paraffin lamp and leaves two candles next to his bed. A hot bath is out of the question. As in Pilgrim's, there's piped cold water, but for hot water, pots need filling and then heating on the stove. He resigns himself to a tepid sponge bath; he'd hate to leave soot smudges on the sheets or pillar case. He feels a pulse of impatience at the primitive methods. In Johannesburg there is no thought to these amenities. I've not become spoilt, he thinks to himself. It's time the country caught up with the city.

They set out early the next morning. The taste of that strong black coffee he had for breakfast lingers persistently on his tongue and at the back of his throat. Mrs. Levy had been disdainfully apologetic. "I'm afraid there's no milk," she had said. "The ice boy didn't arrive this week so I had to throw out the few perishables left. Good opportunity to clean the ice box out, though. We don't have those fancy Frigidaires like you city folk. But there's toast and jam, and this coffee will keep you going the entire day!"

They make good time to Pilgrim's Rest. Has he missed the beauty of nature here? He cannot decide as they drive through the undulating landscape.

The store is closed. He finds Mah at home, going through her ledgers and stock lists. Bertie has been packed off to school, Mah tells him, but not without an argument. She has lost more weight and her face is drawn.

"We have some money to settle debts," she tells him, "but I can't see how we're going to restock the store.

"And I've let the workers go," she says. "No point in keeping them on when I don't know myself what will be."

"I hope you didn't pay them wages," he says. "Especially since they were probably the

thieves in the first place!"

Mah lifts her hands up into the air. "We don't know who the *ganovim* are" she says. "But I wouldn't be surprised if it's as you say." She closes the ledger. " You can ask them a million times what happened. All you get is sullen silence and they look down at the floor."

"I need to heat water to wash," Theodore changes the subject. He is desperate to be rid of the clinging feeling of soot buried in every pore. But first he needs the loo; down the garden path he goes to that wretched outhouse, and his impatience for this primitiveness soars.

Mah gets up. She began the ritual hours ago, when she lit the coal stove, anticipating her eldest son's needs. Now she fills pots with cold water. Theodore heaves them onto the range.

The galvanized bath is already out on the bathroom floor. Theodore places it under the single tap and runs cold water to the first mark. He has now lost count of the times his temper has flared at the primitive basics here, and longs for Johannesburg's hot water taps.

Bertie barges in. He has run all the way from school in Uptown and his face is flushed. He's eager to thump Theodore on his upper arm in his usual frenzied greeting, and almost tears the letter he's holding in his other hand. He had planned to be the first one out of class, and so he was, only to be waylaid by Mevrouw from the post office. She'd called him over, and even though irregular, had entrusted the envelope to him. "I think it's important," she had said. "Make sure you give this to your ma right away, now." He had all but snatched it from her hand, but she held back and said, "you tell your mah that Young Simon is probably drunk somewhere, and that's why I gave you the letta. You hear? You tell her that, hey."

"Ja, ja," Bertie had blurted in exasperation. "I'll give it to Mah. Ag man, I'm in a hurry." And with that he had grabbed the envelope and doubled down into a sprint towards Lower Town and home.

He slams the letter down into the table. "That's for you Mah," he says and turns to Theodore to catch up on tales from the big city.

Theodore laughs at his younger brother's impatience, although he could be laughing at himself too; he's not a paragon of patience either. And this time he has plenty to tell. Bertie will stare at him in disbelief when he hears about the toppled tram.

Mah picks up the envelope. Her hand shakes slightly, and she hands it to Theodore. "You open it. I don't have the nerves."

Theodore pales as he glances down at the letter. Then feels his face redden and his heart skip a beat. "It's from an insurance company," he says. "I didn't know Pah had a policy."

Mah waves his query away. "Nu, so read it already. What does it say?"

"Dear Mrs. - well at least they've spelled the name right - we of De Villiers and Associates extend our heartfelt condolences to you on the recent loss of your husband, the holder of policy number," Theodore stops. His eyes have read ahead and he sees the sum before he can articulate the amount. His face had paled, but now he

feels heat rising through his body and his cheeks redden. He says the amount out aloud. There is silence. Even Bertie is dumbstruck and sits motionless.

Theodore stares at Mah.

The surprise and disbelief change to a cautious reality.

"Mah," he says breathlessly, "this changes everything!"

He looks down at the letter, repeats the previous line and then continues. "As the beneficiary of said policy, a cheque in said amount has been issued in your name, and may be collected from our offices, at the address as stated below, at your convenience. You are requested to inform us in writing should you prefer to receive said cheque via registered post. Sincerely De Villiers and Associates."

Mah gets up. "I need to think," she says. She walks out to the stoep.

Theodore joins her. The shadow from Mount Sheba behind them slowly lengthens to darken more and more of the garden.

"There's nothing for you here in Pilgrim's Rest," he says. "Bring Bertie to Johannesburg and we'll all be together. It's possible now."

Mah lifts her hands into the air.

Bertie stands in the door frame, listening.

"Come to Johannesburg, Mah. We'll all be there: Granny Ella, your brothers and sisters. And Pah is there too."

Mah nods.

"And you can go back to working for the Benevolent," Theodore adds. "You've always missed volunteering for the Society."

"I know," Mah says. She stares out over the garden and even lifts her eyes for a moment to take in the sunset. "And so that is what we will do."

Bertie shoots out onto the stoep. He jumps up and pummels the air with his right fist and then his left. He half turns and, jumping high, kicks his right foot out in the direction of the outhouse.

"No more running," he shouts, "to the bottom of the garden!"

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Written by Brian Binyamin Meyer in February, 2023

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