

KBP-15

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

A PRINCESS OF SORTS
Even Privilege Has Its Risks

c/o INCWA

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
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Dear Peter,

My friend Elizabeth is a real peach.

By that I mean the impression most people get of her is of something appealingly sweet, a little bit fuzzy, and very easily bruised. I have known her almost the entire time I have been here, and I met her originally in the coin-operated laundromat around the corner from the Mark Hotel in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, where I first stayed. She was twenty then. She was doing her own wash for the first time in her life. It was a novel and exciting experience for her. She was ruining her clothes.

Elizabeth is an extremely attractive young woman. Blond hair, auburn eyes, a round, uncluttered face gives her a direct sort of beauty. I've seen men stare at her almost in surprise as much as appreciation. She wears expensive clothes that are always well tailored. She is also very young, naive, and trusting. If her sheltered upbringing kept her from the traumas of clothes

washing, you can imagine the number of things about South Africa she had no idea even existed.

The first time we met (I confess I helped her with the washing; I told her where the coins went), she told me of having received a Mercedes Benz as a gift for graduating from High School. But it was simply too much work to park such a big car, so she eventually traded it in for a cute little Fiat.

Elizabeth had got a college degree, breaking some taboos by being a woman in business courses, and had moved here from Cape Town to start a career. She worked for the subsidiary of an American market-research firm, and usually finished work by mid-afternoon. We got to know one another by having tea in the hotel lobby in the afternoons.

At the time, which was only a few months into my stay, I was reluctant to be seen socializing with a white woman.

Kendal Price is a fellow of the Institute studying the cultures of South Africa, her black homelands, and the bordering African states.

My original concern had been for myself. I had no desire for single-handed battle with any great white psychotic male defenders of white woman's virtue. However, after a few afternoon teas with Elizabeth I realized my concern would have to be for her. She was totally oblivious to certain realities of South African society. The young woman's upbringing had been so very privileged she showed no awareness of the implications of her socializing with a nonwhite—even a foreign nonwhite (or coloured, which is what I must have seemed to her).

Quite literally, she had not known any blacks who were not cooking food, tending a yard, or waiting tables, so to find one who was a peer was utterly fascinating. She had no idea it was not socially acceptable, and perhaps even dangerous for her to be seen repeatedly with a non-white male. She had grown up believing she could do anything she wanted to do. Anything. And the way she acted with me reflected that not only had she not even thought of restricting her activity with someone she found interesting, she would not tolerate anyone else restricting her either. Not anyone.

Elizabeth had a boyfriend, a Greek fellow I met a couple of times. But as far as she was concerned, being with me had no bearing on anybody else since she and I were platonic friends. So, it was left to me to decline politely invitations to have tea in her room or arrange for at least one other person to be included on an evening outing—even if just a movie. It never occurred to her that picking me as a friend could, in this country, have a pronounced

negative effect on her life.

Surprisingly, what I found in her was the desire for liberation. The idea that she could change her life was as alien to her as it would be to the average black South African washerwoman.

Within a couple of months of our meeting she moved to Pretoria and into an apartment with her Greek boyfriend. We kept in touch and she occasionally came back to the hotel to visit the group with whom we both regularly had eaten dinner.

On one of these occasions, a group of six of us had arranged to spend the evening at a local restaurant. The afternoon before the outing Elizabeth called me to say her car had broken down. Would I be willing to give her a ride? I thought, "no harm can come of that."

Everybody in the group worked early in the mornings so the party broke up around 10:30 pm. I got Elizabeth back to Pretoria before 11:15, and shortly after we arrived so did her boyfriend. So she made tea and we all sat and talked for about half an hour. He seemed a pleasant enough guy; rich, and spoiled, but reasonably articulate and well-mannered.

After I had left, as an 8:00 am telephone call from Elizabeth informed me, the Greek boyfriend had beaten and then raped her.

Now, I know that rape in the context of marriage of two people living together is a marginally accepted concept in America. It is virtually unheard

of in the Republic of South Africa, however, and sexual assault following a physical beating certainly fits my criteria for one of the lowest known forms of human behavior.

When I saw her later that day she had a black eye, a bruise on her chin, and her face was puffy all over from the slapping. Those were the signs I could see. She didn't mention the rest of her body and I didn't ask. About the humiliation and sense of betrayal she felt, I didn't have to ask. She wore them like a shroud.

Although she told me what he said his rationale was for beating her up, none of it mattered. This had never happened to her before. She had gone out with groups before, had been brought home by a male and her "boyfriend" had never reacted this way. What baffled her and made me seethe was this young coward's ability to sit there calmly while I was in the room and then beat her after I had left. From the circumstances, it was obvious I had been the catalyst for his abrupt behavior change. In yet another example of the South African way of doing things, he had unleashed his frustration on somebody who meant him no harm and was defenseless in the face of violence.

(For the sake of my project—that is, to stay in the country—and the good name of the Institute, I guess I was fortunate not to bump into the Greek boyfriend in the following weeks or months. I won't pretend to any saintly qualities; I wanted the young man to come to serious harm. Oh, I did have the restraint not to seek him out, but had the oppor-

tunity for a tête-à-tête presented itself, I would not have passed it up. Apparently my sentiments were not unique. Elizabeth's father threatened to kill him.)

Interpersonal violence and sexual assault are not unique to America, and I was not expecting South African society to be exempt from them. However, I was surprised by where and why I was introduced to them personally. This incident did not occur in the environment of an underdeveloped third world state. It occurred in the strata of a society that has as much wealth and exposure to western values as any European community.

The demands and responsibilities put on a young, wealthy, white South African are so few, even the concept of honor is twisted appropriately for comfort. (Girl hangin' out with a darky? Feel disgraced? Don't risk personal harm confronting him—they carry knives, you know—beat the girl. The most you'll hurt is your hands.)

Now, months later, she is glad to hear from me because the now-ex-boyfriend still hasn't caught on to the fact that she wasn't raised to take a few hits, then kiss and make up. She has moved out. He pesters. I suggest inviting him to a certain poorly-lit neighborhood in Johannesburg where he can try out his boxing skills with the locals. The offer is appealing to Elizabeth, but she doesn't think it will help the situation either.

Added to her intolerance for physical abuse has come a heightened appreciation of some of the inequities of the Republic. I hate to think she's had sensitivity beaten into

her. I prefer to think her experience has brought out a greater appreciation of pain and senseless suffering. I must admit to being a bit surprised at the effect some of the things I have talked about has had on her. In terms of cultural sensitivity, while the moral equivalent of what I've talked about might have been learned from watching "Mr. Ed," I've felt like I was revealing Ho Chi Minh's principles of guerrilla warfare. I might have spoken only about some rudeness on the part of a hotel guest to one of the black workers, but with Elizabeth I often felt like a foaming-at-the-mouth revolutionary. It was as if she was plugging into channels the designers of her system never dreamed she'd try and locate: the overload was often quite visible. All of this happened over tea, too.

One of the more agreeable aspects of Elizabeth's consciousness raising was her lack of pretentiousness. Many South African whites, once they found out that I was a black American would start making all sorts of grandiose vows, promises and plans about what they personally would do or give up in the name of all that was right. With Elizabeth, denial was never even discussed. Because of her near-total insulation while growing up, when we met she didn't feel compelled to posture for my benefit. Who was I anyhow?

Even as her perceptions of the society around her changed, doing without seemed a preposterous idea. That never changed. In the same conversation about the inequities of the housing situation for blacks, she would talk about the condominium on the beach her father had just given her. Elizabeth

was someone who displayed almost all of the time, all of the contradictions involved in being a thinking white South African. She thought of others, which is something I believe most white South Africans are capable of, but don't do nearly often enough.

Because she dressed up for any outing, when it came time to meet her in the city I'd make sure I was wearing a coat and tie. I also made sure that where we met was someplace very "international" (basically that meant either Mike's Kitchen—a plastic-tablecloth, salad-bar-equipped steak house—or three other places in all of Johannesburg.) Also I made sure I had some money for a taxi in case her car broke down again. I wanted to do as much as possible to make sure she survived her friendship with me.

Sincerely,



Received in Hanover. 4/23/84

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