

The breaking point

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The Breaking Point

By GEORGE MILLER

I saw Chris again today. He was lurking in the shadow of the trees across the road from my Sea Point flat as I drove home from the office.

When I had parked the car I stood a while looking across the road at him. He was dressed in a pair of grimy overalls and heavy work boots, and I knew he must have come straight from the garage. For perhaps 30 seconds we stood facing each other across the busy street: I mute, expectant; he smouldering, sullen. Once he took a step towards me, then he seemed to think better of it, shoved his hand deep into the pockets of his overalls and turned away.

And now I sit at my desk in the bay window writing, excusing, rationalizing. It is almost 8.00 and the winter evening has purpled into night. If I stood by the window I might perhaps still see him, standing there accusingly in a pool of lamplight like a pointing finger. Yet I know that for all the sullen hatred, something still draws him to this place: perhaps, do I dare hope, the spark I lit in him that final beautiful-hideous evening; a spark lit in its turn from the furnace he kindled in me the night we first met so many months ago . . .

*

I hadn't intended going to Frieda's that night although I adored her Sunday evening soirees in her glorious home perched high on the mountainside above the Atlantic. Frieda's soirees were something of an institution, and very much a part of Cape Town's weekend cultural life.

But this particular Sunday I had a mountain of work to get through, and I had decided to miss her surprise attraction, whatever it might be. Her surprises were famous. They had ranged from the stars of a visiting international rugby team to a brace of touring Spanish dancers; from a clutch of Cabinet Ministers to a world famous Shakespearian actor.

When Frieda phoned me at 9.00 that Sunday night I knew something was wrong.

«For Heaven's sake get over here fast,» she urged in her husky contralto voice. «Everything's gone wrong and the party is the most God-awful flop. I suppose I was silly but I decided to make my surprise a multi-racial guest list.»

«Multi-racial?» I said startled. «You mean Coloureds and Africans?»

Cape Town has the reputation of being the most liberal city in South Africa on the colour question but even there, by inflexible tradition, «mixed» parties are something for leftists and avant garde students—not the moneyed upper crust like Frieda.

«I'll ask who I damn well please to my soirees,» Frieda said crisply. The trouble is, my white guests are acting so oddly. Half of them are throwing their arms around the Coloureds and the others won't have anything to do with them.

«Really Frieda, you are the limit. Why didn't you only invite liberals?»

«Then it wouldn't have been any fun. Anyway I did ask Bertha . . .»

«That nymphomaniac! The only thing she's liberal about is sex . . .»

«Anyway she hasn't turned up yet. Then there's Patrick Friar. I asked him specially because I heard he was so friendly with this Coloured dancer Roley de Beer, but the moment Patrick arrived he was very rude to Roley. Now he's commandeered a bottle of whisky for himself and its getting horribly drunk . . .»

«Christ!» I could hardly explain to Frieda the exact nature of Patrick's in-

terest in the young dancer, nor that this particular romance had been broken off abruptly after a screaming row two weeks earlier.

«Oh Arthur,» Frieda wailed, «What can I do?»

Suddenly the thought of Frieda trying to cope not only with a mixed bunch of liberals and racialists, but also some of the leading members of Cape Town's multi-racial gay set, became irresistible.

«If you can hold off the fist fights for half an hour,» I said. «I'll be right over. I think this is going to be a memorable evening.»

*

Inside Frieda's house two separate parties were in progress. In the lounge the multi-racial soiree was rapidly becoming a Bacchanalia. As though aware of the racialists everyone was acting just a little larger than life. Simple movements became exaggerated gestures of defiance, chuckles turned into shrill shrieks of mirth, casual motions of friendship into grossly suggestive innuendos.

In the study the disapproving guests were almost as noisy, as though by sheer volume of sound they could drown out the fact of the goings on in the lounge.

On the broad stoep, forming a one man party of his own, was Patrick Friar, director of companies, art connoisseur and staunch believer in sex across the colour line: Patrick Friar of the fleshy double chin and predatory eye.

He had a half-full glass of whisky in one hand and a half-empty bottle of Scotch in the other. He was very drunk.

«Welcome to Bantustan,» he called out cheerfully as I walked up the path. Then he turned his attention to the party in the lounge, watching covertly through the glass doors as Roley de Beer gave an impersonation of a well-known local actress.

«Oh there you are, poppet,» Frieda bawled. She continued under her breath, «For Heaven's sake do something—anything—to make them mix. Use your brilliant legal brain . . .» She entered the lounge, somehow managing to wear a worried frown and a bright smile simultaneously.

At the bottom of the garden the gate slammed.

Patrick turned. «Hello, hello,» he murmured. «That's a lovely slice of dark meat coming up the path, dearie. And is that Bertha too? Drat! It looks as though I'm in for some competition.» He raised his voice to its usual nasal whine. «Bertha, darling, you must introduce me to your friend. This is the most perfectly ghastly party and if some kind person isn't very sweet to me soon, I shall puke.»

Bertha wrinkled her nose. She had a very red face and very pale, stringy blonde hair. The total effect was of a beetroot surmounted by a crown of spaghetti. But everyone agreed she had the figure of a girl half her age.

The couple walked into the pool of light cast by the shaded stoep lamps, and I saw the stranger properly for the first time.

Like most South Africans I have always kept my sexual interests in check well on my own side of the colour line. Unless one has the wealth of a Patrick Friar—and his thick hide—the legal risks of breaking the Immorality Laws are far too great, even if one can survive the social stigma of being found out. But when I saw Chris I felt as though some huge hand had reached inside me and squeezed my vitals into a tight knot.

There is a truism in South Africa that racial inter-mixture can produce the most exotic beauty or the utmost ugliness. With Chris all the genes had fitted into patterns of beauty. He was tall and beautifully proportioned, not with the bulging distortion of the professional muscleman, but with the sensuous virility

of the natural athlete. His face was the face of an angel in which innocence, wonder and good humour were written . . . except for the eyes.

Next to me Patrick was slobbering over the brawny coffee coloured youngster in the dirty white overalls. I was conscious only of those eyes, glowing and smouldering with a startling inner passion.

«This is Chris van Rensberg,» Bertha announced defiantly as Frieda came back on to the stoep. «My car broke down outside the big garage on the Main Road. He very kindly fixed it up even though he was finished work for the day, and then he drove me up here to make sure the car was all right.» She gave a thin lipped smile. «I'm sure you won't mind if he comes in for a drink. Chris, this is Frieda, our hostess; and Patrick Friar who's very rich and collects things; and Arthur Broome, who'll get you out of trouble if the police arrest you.»

I grasped Chris' outstretched hand. It was the calloused hand of a workman, but the fingers were long and tapering. His handclasp was firm and friendly, without any hint of servility. The invisible fist inside me squeezed tighter.

Frieda, Bertha and Chris entered the house, followed by Patrick, who kept his eyes fixed on the boy's slim waist. I stayed outside. Frieda's party, I decided, was beyond repair.

I was still there an hour later when Chris came out again. He brushed past me, his face hard and set, and was halfway down the steps when I called out.

«What, are you going so soon?»

He turned around, his eyes sparked with fury and contempt.

«Yes. What do *you* want?»

I picked up my glass and walked down the steps towards him. «Chris, I don't know what happened inside, but let me apologize. That woman should never have brought you here. Hey, what's wrong?»

Chris' shoulders hunched up and he covered his eyes with his hands. He stood there grotesquely, sobbing silently.

Hesitantly, I reached up and placed a hand on his shoulder. I could feel the hard ridges of muscle quivering beneath the material of his overalls.

«There now, boy. Come and sit down somewhere and tell me all about it. I'm a lawyer used to listening to people's troubles.»

He moved into the shadow of the garden. I followed.

«I'm so ashamed,» he whispered. «Ashamed of my people, of everything. That dancer fellow, Roley, made fun of me and tried to dance with me . . . and he whispered I must come and visit him after the party. And that woman Bertha sniffing around me like a bitch on heat . . . And the fat man, Patrick. He followed me to the lavatory and . . .»

I held up my hand. «Don't tell me Chris.» I hated Patrick with the bitter gall of jealousy.

«I only came because that Bertha woman said I'd meet rich, famous people. I'm an ambitious boy, sir. I don't want to be a garage mechanic all my life.»

«What do you want to be, Chris?»

He shifted his shoulders and looked at me shyly. «I want to be a lawyer, sir. I want to go to court and protect my people against injustice. I have my matriculation, you know . . .»

As he spoke I felt a wild, illogical impulse break over me. I reached into my inside pocket and pulled out a card. «This is my card, Chris.» I felt my throat choking up with excitement as I spoke. «If you are serious about becoming a lawyer, perhaps I can do something. I have a number of non-white clients and

I could use another clerk.» The words tumbled over themselves as I watched his face being transformed from suspicion, to disbelief, and then delight. «I don't know what the garage pays you but I'll guarantee to match it. And if you really want to qualify you can start lectures part-time next year at the University. I have a standard arrangement with my clerks . . . I pay the tuition fees and they pay me back when they qualify.»

Chris was shaking his head and tears were streaming down his face again. «Sir . . . oh, sir . . .» was all he said. He reached over and grabbed me by both shoulders. I felt the hands dig into my flesh and my body danced with a million searing joys.

«Sir, I'll never forget this evening—never, as long as I live.»

That night I dreamed of smouldering, passion-filled eyes, and a smooth, hard beige body. I awoke limp und exhausted, and happier than I'd been for years.

*

I met Patrick again, strolling along the Sea Point beachfront, a few days before Chris began working for me.

«Ah, my dear,» he remarked, «I had no idea you were one for the darkies. I always thought you preferred those blonde sailors you pick up in Dock Road.» He sniggered breathily through his nose.

«You're a disgusting old queen, Patrick. You don't care if the whole of Cape Town knows about you, do you?»

«It pays to advertise, dearie. But you are the sly one, aren't you, whisking off Christopher like that right under my panting nose. When does he begin working for you,» he chuckled again, «at the office, I mean?»

«Who told you about that?» I demanded.

He waved a hand airily. «Oddly enough I learned it from Christopher's own strawberry lips two days ago. I've discovered he's quite a name in the Coloured rugby world so I watched a match last Saturday. I finally ran him to earth in the changing room after the game.» He paused reminiscently. «Delightful! All those muscular beige bodies in nothing more than jock straps waving their hard little buttocks at me . . .»

«You're a filthy-minded beast, Patrick. Don't your motives ever rise above your navel?»

«Seldom, my dear. And like the late Mr. Wilde I am irresistibly drawn to the lower orders. You know what I say? When you live in a world of Chanel Number Five there's nothing like an occasional good whiff of pig's dung.» He grinned. «Of course, one has disappointments. Christopher is a case in point. When I took him home to dinner after the match I found he may have a pig's dung technique in bed—but, alas, he has a Chanel Number Five mind. Not my type at all.»

I found myself breathing hard. «Are you trying to tell me that you and he . . .? I don't believe it.»

Patrick shrugged. «Believe what you like. But don't be so bloody highminded with me. Just because you play the hypocrite, don't think you can hide your motives from Auntie Patrick. I read you like a book, Arthur, and I know your real motives with young Christopher as well as you do . . .»

*

I thought of Patrick's words many times in the months that followed.

Frankly, I found it impossible to analyze my own motives. When I saw Chris at the office, hard-working and earnest in a sober dark suit, I felt nothing more than a surge of protectiveness and pride that I had plucked him from obscurity to give him the chance of a lifetime. But at other times, when I lay in bed at night, or caught a glimpse of Chris dressed for a rugby practice or lying under his ten year old car in dirty overalls, I suspected that Patrick was right . . .

When the University term began in February Chris started attending lectures. He had a quick brain and a driving inner compulsion to master the intricacies of South African law. His Professors assured me he was a natural lawyer.

June approached, and with it the first University examinations. From a casual remark Chris had passed I gathered his home in a run-down Coloured suburb was far too crowded for study. I extended an open invitation for him to use my Sea Point flat after lectures. Soon he was turning up two or three times a week. I put a desk in my spare room, gave him a latch key, and told him to come and go as he pleased.

I tried, wherever possible, to be away from the flat when Chris was there. I liked to think I was motivated by the purest impulses, but I never convinced myself fully. Seeing Chris each day was still exquisite torture, dreaming of him each night a frustrating delight. It was best to keep temptation at bay.

In my heart I knew the breaking point was fast approaching.

*

The flat was in darkness when I opened the front door one Saturday night early in June, but a moment later the passage was flooded with light and Chris appeared at the door of the lounge. He was dressed in rugby kit and his face was ashen. Somewhere, I could smell the sweet fumes of cheap brandy.

«Chris, what are you doing here on a Saturday night? You look terrible.»

He began talking in a low urgent voice. «You must help me, Mr. Broome. I'm in serious trouble with the police . . .»

«Chris!» All the pent up emotion of the past nine months was in that cry. «Sit down. Now tell me everything, and for God's sake tell the truth.»

«It's me and Mrs. Franklin . . . you remember, sir . . . Bertha.»

I felt a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. «What sort of trouble?»

«I was playing in a league rugby match today. She came to watch . . .»

«Just a moment, Chris. Have you seen Bertha often since that first night?»

There was a long pause. «Not often, sir, but I've seen her.» I tried to control the illogical churning sickness in my stomach. «Afterwards I offered her a lift home. But first I took her to a place where they don't mind serving liquor to Coloured boys with white girls . . .»

«Girls?» I said half to myself. «Bertha's at least 35 . . .»

«She drove the car because she said it would look better if anyone saw us. We drove up on to the De Waal Drive and off the road a way where no-one could see us. Then someone shone a torch into the car. She'd left the engine running and we were back on the road within seconds. But I looked back and saw two policemen. They have the number of my car.» Chris shivered. «They'll trace it and I'll get six months inside for breaking the Immorality Act—if I'm lucky.»

I made another effort to control myself. «Think carefully, Chris. When did it happen? What was Bertha wearing and what were you doing at the moment the flashlight shone? Where were your hands? Were you dressed? And where's Bertha now?»

«She's at her flat. It happened about an hour ago, sir. She was dressed in jeans and a sort of plain blue blouse. The blouse was open but I don't think they could have seen anything from that distance. Her hands were—were . . . anyway I don't think they could have seen that either.»

I sat for a moment in thought. Then I phoned Bertha. Afterwards I called my good friend, Major Johannes Koch of the Criminal Investigation Department.

«It sounds silly, Johannes, but my clerk is sure the man who flashed the light was a policeman . . . well he was in uniform . . . no it wasn't my own car . . . the Mercedes has been giving me trouble so I borrowed my clerk's jallop for the afternoon . . . well you can hardly blame me for racing off: there have been so many attacks up on the mountainside recently that I naturally assumed it was a prowler . . . yes, I'm coaching him for his June law exams . . . that's right, we stopped because he wanted to relieve himself . . . what was I wearing? Why, a pair of jeans and a plain blue shirt . . .»

After 20 minutes I put down the phone. Sweat was trickling down my forehead. «O.K. Chris,» I said. «I'll see him on Monday to make a statement, but it'll be all right. Lets hope they don't wonder how a woman with spaghetti blonde hair has suddenly become a man with a crewcut . . .»

Chris shook his head unbelievably. «You've saved my career—my life, sir.»

«Forget it, Chris. Lets have a drink.» I went to the liquor cabinet.

Suddenly Chris laughed: a great gusty laugh of relief and joy. In a moment he was serious again. «How can I ever show my gratitude, sir?»

A wild, improbable emotion surged through my vitals, but all I said was, «Firstly promise you'll never see Bertha again. Quite apart from the Immorality Act, she's 15 years too old for you.»

«Oh, I promise that sir,» he murmured fervently.

«Secondly, you can stop calling me 'sir' in my own flat. My name's Arthur.»

Chris flushed with pleasure.

«Finally, you can help me finish this bottle of *good* brandy. We both need a stiff bracer . . .»

*

Two hours later the bottle was empty and Chris was sprawled on his chair, lazily expounding some obscure point of Roman Dutch Law. I smiled, feeling a double thrill . . . of pride in my own Pygmalion creation, and the erotic stirring as I took in the powerful expanse of thigh and calf below the rugby shorts.

Something in my expression must have caught Chris' attention. He flushed, stood suddenly and reached for the small bag at his side. «It's late and I still have to change into my ordinary clothes.»

A hot flame of desire leaped up and licked my tongue. «You can sleep here.»

«Here? In your lounge?» His eyes opened wide.

I looked at him, as though for the first time. His eyes opened wider with dawning understanding. I could hear my breath coming in a jagged, syncopated rhythm. It was now or never. «I have a double bed in my bedroom.»

His eyes flashed once, then he lowered his glance and padded behind me into the bedroom. When I next looked his eyes were subdued, his face as expressionless as his voice. «It's hard for a poor Coloured boy to show his gratitude . . . and you've done so much for me. I never knew before what you wanted . . .» He reached up and slowly pulled the brightly coloured rugby jersey over his head. He was swaying slightly, but whether it was tiredness, or drink or emotion, I could not say.

I stood breathlessly, staring at the broad expanse of chest, at the unexpected jungle of hair between the flat nipples, at the concave curve of his stomach.

«All these months I've been wondering what you wanted.» The jersey dropped to the carpet and he began fumbling with the rugby shorts.

«No Chris . . . not just for gratitude . . .» I could feel myself trembling all over as the breaking point I had dreamed of so long swooped closer.

The shorts dropped beside the jersey. He kicked off his shoes and tore off the vividly striped rugby stockings. My eyes followed the curves and lines of his body as he straightened, past the black haired thighs, upwards past the brief athletic supporter which he wore, like a model in a physique photograph.

He lurched slightly, and I leapt forward to steady him. The contact with the smooth skin of his upper arm sent an electric tremor through me. His face was still expressionless but now, again, those glowing, animal eyes smouldered back into life.

«Not just for gratitude, Chris,» I whispered. And now, at last, the breaking point had come as, beneath my hands, I felt the hardness and softness of his young torso. Gently, atremble with the breathlessness of the moment, I unpeeled the last brief elastic garment from his straining, responsive body . . .

*

Hours later I awoke, utterly exhausted, and stretched out my hand.

The bed, beside me, was empty. I heard a movement and switched on the light.

«Chris, what's wrong?»

He stood, naked, on the carpet, his arms akimbo, his eyes withering me with a glance of purest hatred.

«I've paid my debt, haven't I? What more do you expect?»

«Chris, I don't understand!» I felt as though he had suddenly slashed at me savagely with a knife.

«I've been doing some thinking while you slept off your little orgy. O.K. so you made a fool of me. I thought I'd found one white man who would treat me as a man, respect me for myself—not just for what he could get out of me. That's why I respected you. O.K. so I was wrong.» Tears began streaming down his cheeks, but his eyes never lost their glaze of contempt.

«But . . . but I do respect you, Chris. Why do you think I waited so long? What happened tonight is something different. You could have stopped me long ago if you didn't want me. Why only a couple of hours ago on this bed . . . the things you said . . . the things we did. All that meant something . . .»

He smiled bitterly through the tears. «Yes Mr. Poofter Broome. It means you can compare notes with your fat friend Patrick. He offered me ten pounds

that first night . . . more than I earned in a week. I needed the cash and I said O.K. But you—you went much better. You offered me respect. At least his money was genuine.»

«Don't Chris . . . please!»

He bent down savagely and began putting on his clothes. «If you're so fond of Coloured boys, Mr. Broome, how would you like an introduction to Roley de Beer? He's just your type.»

I made one last effort. «Chris, you must believe me . . . I love you. What happened tonight merely put the seal on that love. I'd gladly sacrifice all the physical pleasure I gained for just one atom of your respect. Because even when I have forgotten how to love, I'll still respect you, Chris.»

He snorted and stalked to the front door. It slammed behind him.

A moment later it opened a fraction and something tinkled on the floor. I bent down and picked up the latch key I had given Chris.

*

Chris wasn't at work on Monday, nor on Tuesday. On Wednesday I drove deep into the Coloured slums to visit his home. A scraggy, prematurely aged man with a face seamed by work and worry, answered the door.

«He won't see you, Mr. Broome, sir.»

«How do you know who I am . . . and who are you?»

«Chris told me you would call some day. But he won't see you. He told me he's giving up law. I'm his uncle. I've looked after the family since his mother died.»

«But he writes his law exams in less than a fortnight. He can't just throw away his career like a piece of dirty paper. You must talk to him!»

The old man shook his head and smiled a strange, secret smile.

«Chris is 20 years old and a grown man, sir. I can't force him to do anything.» He gave me a shy, sideways glance. «He tells me many things, sir, and what he doesn't tell me I usually guess. My only wish for him is to have happiness. But today he is still ugly with anger. Tomorrow he says he will start work again at the garage. Perhaps some hard work with his hands will make his temper sweet again. There is still time for him to change his mind before the exams . . .»

*

That was a week ago. I fought the temptation to visit him at the garage and waited.

Two nights ago I saw him standing outside my block of flats as I drove home from work. I parked the car quickly, with a soaring heart, but by the time I reached the entrance he was gone. And then, tonight, I saw him again . . .

There are still four more days before the law exams begin.

Meanwhile here I sit in the bay window writing, excusing, rationalizing . . . and waiting.

Waiting for Chris to understand that there is no love without respect.

Waiting for the spark I know is there to burst into flames once again . . .

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