

Damn kaffir

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DAMN KAFFIR

By George Miller

Jerry's baggage was in the hallway when they went out for breakfast on Sunday morning, but it was only afterwards, when they actually saw him standing next to his suitcases, that the storm broke.

Henk opened the front door of the house, took in the tall, coffee-coloured figure standing with one toe balanced delicately on top of a holdall, gaped unbelievably, and raced upstairs. Eric followed, rubbing his chin nervously.

«Jesus H. Christ!» Henk exploded on the first landing. «Did you see that?» His grey eyes were suddenly flecked with steel.

«It's nothing to get worked up about,» Eric soothed, without too much conviction.

«Nothing—hell! He's a bloody kaffir—and he's moving in here!»

Eric sighed. «Henk, how many times do I have to tell you we're in London now—not Johannesburg. People look at things differently here. And anyway, he's not black—he looked like a Cape Coloured to me.»

«What's the difference,» Henk snapped. «I'm not staying in any house that takes in kaffirs.» The firm lines around his mouth and chin had set in hard, ugly creases. «I'll put it straight to Mrs. Tomkins—it's either him or us.» He threw open the door of their second floor bed-sitter and strode to the window.

«Him or you,» Eric corrected quietly. «You can count me out of this nonsense.»

Henk's nose crinkled up in disgust. «A fine bloody South African you are. Twenty-thousand of us in London and I have to choose a liberal to room with. You make me sick!»

There was a long, angry silence. Then Henk continued moodily. «And I'll bet they give him that room directly opposite ours across the courtyard. It's empty now and . . . yes, look, there he is now! Jesus! Imagine having to live with that five yards away.» He turned an anguished face to his companion. «How can I bring Maureen here at night when I know that black baboon will be standing a few feet away, with his nose pressed against the windowpane watching us. Christ, if I caught him I'd donder him! I'll never be able to bring Maureen here again.»

«Well that'll be a change,» Eric remarked acidly. «Maybe I'll be able to go to bed occasionally in my own room when I want to.»

«Don't be like that. Nine times out of ten I only have her here when you're on night shift.»

«What about last night? One o'clock and you still had that «Do not disturb» sign up on the door.»

«Okay, so that was the tenth time out of ten. And I told you I'll give you a break and go to Maureen's place tonight. What do you expect me to do, man, lie down and die or something? Anyway, I don't know why you never bring women here like me. I wouldn't mind . . .» Eric opened his mouth automatically to reply but Henk got in first. «All right, so you've got principles. Bloody liberal.»

The burly South African began peeling off his shirt. «I'm going to sunbathe on the roofgarden. And if that cheeky kaffir comes up there he'd better watch out. You coming?»

Eric shook his head. He sat on the bed and watched Henk undress, following each movement of the rippling muscles as he stepped out of his clothes and into his brief swimming trunks. And all the time his poker face was his impregnable guard.

«See you,» Henk said at the door. «I'll talk to Mrs. Tomkins later . . .»

After he had gone Eric lay back on his bed and for a few minutes allowed his thoughts to stray into the wild, impossible realms of fantasy. Then he raised himself on one elbow, sighed and for the hundredth time wondered how he had managed to fall for an impossible bastard like Henk in the first place.

*

« . . . And that's not all. After the old bitch as good as told me to get stuffed she started telling me all about this—this orang-utang next door. She said he comes from Trinidad. And do you know what? He's a dancer—a ballet dancer.» Henk uttered the words with loathing. Every hair of his blond crew-cut bristled with outrage, and his nostrils flared.

«Jesus, man! A dancer. A pansy. A kaffir pansy . . . practically next door.»

Eric propped himself on one elbow and burst out laughing. «Sorry, but you look so funny. What did Mrs. Tomkins say when you told her you'd be leaving?»

Henk whirled round angrily. «I did not tell her that! Do you think I'd give that old bag the satisfaction of watching me run just because a kaffir stuck his nose in the door? Anyway,» he went on more quietly, «this place is still the best value I've come across in London. But that black bastard had better not knock me,» he ended fiercely. «I'll be watching him.»

Eric smiled. He knew he should feel angry, but Henk was too outrageous for anger. There was a classic simplicity about Henk and his thinking. There was nothing of the bitter, twisted racist about him. He simply accepted without question that the black man existed on a different level of humankind. For him the problem of race was beyond the need of thinking out. Why question the fact that the world is round, that seeds germinate in the ground — or that kaffirs should stick to their place.

Everything he said and did exasperated Eric—and left him with a vague sense of superiority.

Perhaps, one day, I'll reform him, Eric thought. Perhaps that's why I've stuck with him for so long.

But in his heart of hearts Eric knew that was not the reason . . .

Henk stood by the window muttering under his breath. «Oh no!» he cried suddenly. «Come and look here, man.»

Eric scrambled to his side. Across the courtyard he could see into Jerry's room. For a moment he thought it was empty; then a dark, curly head bobbed into view at the base of the window, disappeared, bobbed into view again, disappeared, until finally the young negro leapt to his feet and executed a prodigious balletic leap in front of the mirror. A moment later he was on his back on the floor, with his feet in the air pedalling violently.

«Bloody exhibitionist!» Henk growled, turning away in distaste. «Look at him there, practically stark, bollocks naked, showing off in front of the window. I suppose he hopes some doll is watching him.»

Eric stayed by the window a moment longer staring into Jerry's room, imprinting the new arrival on his mind. He saw a lithe, beige body in white boxer shorts with rhythmically swinging limbs, and the bulging muscles of a dancer. He saw a long, beige face in which the whole world seemed reflected:

almond-shaped, almost oriental eyes, the high forehead and thin nose of Europe, full lips hinting at Africa and the curly hair of an Arab.

Jerry looked up, saw that he had an audience, and grinned in embarrassment. Eric smiled back and turned away.

«That's all these kaffirs want,» Henk was saying. «A white girl. So he puts on those tight little shorts and starts jumping about in front of the window like a neon sign outside a knock shop. Jesus, it's disgusting!»

«A moment ago you said he was a homosexual,» Eric said mildly.

«You know what these blacks are like,» Henk said, unpeeling his elasticized swimming briefs, and reaching for a shirt. «They'll lay anything on two legs—or four. Damn sex maniacs, the lot of them. Hell, man, I can feel there's going to be some trouble around here soon.»

Eric turned his head aside so that Henk wouldn't see him smile. He often wondered how much bottled up, forbidden libido lay behind the prejudices of so many of his fellow-countrymen. For him, moving to England had been a simple adjustment. His background was the cosmopolitan, mildly liberal atmosphere of a wealthy Johannesburg suburb. One didn't play tennis with Africans, of course, or drink with them, but one realized that they had a raw deal and tried to make things easier at the personal level. But to Henk, fresh from the farm, to whom discrimination was one of the laws of creation, the sight of negroes and whites fraternizing was still an abomination.

Perhaps it was true that desire increased as the prohibition grew stronger. Even now Henk was rationalizing his anger in sexual terms. Of course in this case it obviously wasn't a question of physical attraction—not with anyone as emphatically masculine as Henk—but there was quite possibly an element of jealousy in it somewhere.

Henk seemed to have caught his train of thought. «Well I'd bet I could outlay that black bastard any time,» he said moodily. «Not that I'd touch any woman who went to bed with a kaffir.» Suddenly he brightened. «That reminds me. I got talking to a Swedish doll up on the roof just now. Wow! Is she stacked—and she looks a pushover too. I'm dating her tonight.»

«Didn't you say you were taking Maureen out?»

«Yeah, well I want you to do me a favour. Drop by Maureen's place about seven and tell her I can't make it. Say it's leprosy, or my cousin's just arrived from home or anything. She'll ask you to stay for dinner so you'll get a free meal out of it. And do me a favour—don't come back before midnight. I've got to work fast because she's only here for a week.»

«But Henk . . .»

«You're a sport, man. Midnight then.» His brow clouded momentarily: «And God help that damn kaffir if I catch sight of him . . .»

*

All week Eric braced himself for the threatened explosion from Henk. It was slow in coming. Henk's Scandinavian discovery had a sexual capacity that kept even him fully occupied—when he wasn't busy placating Maureen over broken dates, and the boy across the way slipped temporarily into the background.

He made an ostentatious point of using the bathroom and toilet on the floor below, and he still grumbled occasionally—especially when Jerry began one of his regular p. t. sessions—but on the whole he had more pressing things to worry about.

Once or twice Eric needled him deliberately.

«I can't see why you object to Jerry doing exercises,» he said innocently. «You told me you used to exercise with weights back home . . .»

«That was different!» Henk roared. «I did it to keep fit, not because I wanted people to watch me.»

And again Eric turned his head so that Henk wouldn't see him grin.

He knew the eruption had to come sooner or later. But it wasn't until Saturday that matters came to a head.

Eric was halfway upstairs on Saturday night before he realized he would probably be locked out of his room again. He looked at his watch with annoyance. Ten o'clock. This was the Swedish girl's last night in London. That would mean another two hours at least before Henk took the «Do not disturb» notice from the door.

But the sign was not hanging from the doorhandle.

Eric opened the door, turned on the light—and gaped. Henk was standing by the window, alone and fully dressed.

He wheeled around as Eric entered. «Turn the light off, you fool,» he hissed furiously, then, «Oh what's the difference now. Keep it on!»

Eric rubbed his cheek apprehensively. «What's up? Why are you standing here in the dark?»

Henk's face was flushed, his fists were clenched by his side, and his entire body trembled.

«That dirty kaffir,» he spat.

«But I thought you and that Swedish doll . . .»

«Don't talk to me about that bitch,» Henk snapped. «She's nothing but a low down whore! I found out today that when I was with Maureen on Thursday night she was—she was in that damn kaffir's room.» He jerked his head towards the window. «She's in there with him now . . .»

«That doesn't mean a thing. It's only ten o'clock.»

«You don't understand,» Henk exploded. «I've been here all the time. I saw them . . .»

«You mean you've been spying on them?» Eric asked shocked.

«So what! Don't be so bloody priggish.» He slammed a fist against the wall, setting the electric light fitting dancing. «That filthy tramp! Last night I kept her happy until three—four in the morning. And you know what she did tonight? She laughed at me and said she preferred that dirty . . .»

«You stood here in the dark and watched them . . .»

«She told how he . . .» He gave an exclamation of disgust and looked out the window. «Anyway they've gone now. The light's on and his door is open.» He faced Eric. «I'm going to have a bath. I feel slimy just being in the same building as those two.»

He swept up a towel and slammed the door behind him. A moment later there was a yell, and a series of thumps shook the building.

Eric leapt for the door and raced out into the corridor.

Henk was sprawled feet first about a quarter way the staircase, and a thin trickle of blood was running down his cheek. Jerry was leaning over him solicitously on one knee.

He looked up at Eric bewildered. «I don't know what came over your friend. He saw me coming up the stairs, gave a yell and kinda jumped. Next thing I knew he was tumbling down. Knocked his head a whack on the bannister rail.

Knocked hisself clean out.» Then he grinned. «Lucky I was here though or he mighta killed hisself.»

Eric shook his head distractedly. «I'll call a doctor right away.»

Henk stirred slightly and groaned.

«Looks like he's coming round,» Jerry said. «I'll try to get him up to his room. Don't know what he coulda been thinking to jump like that.»

Henk's eyes flicked open and stared vaguely ahead as Eric squeezed by.

«There you are now,» Jerry said as though humouring an idiot child. «We'll soon have you back in bed. You fetched yourself a nasty knock on the head.»

Henk looked at him groggily. «Go-way-I'm-all-right,» he muttered.

A beige face swum in front of him and his head ached. His cheek felt sticky.

Then the memories burst in a dappling flash of pain. The kaffir—the Swedish doll—she'd sneered at him as a lover, as a man—damn kaffir...

As Jerry's face danced and waved in front of him Henk felt his arm being jockeyed into position around a beige neck, and another arm, hard and muscular, curved across his shoulders and clamped into position under his armpit.

He was being raised, protesting weakly, to his feet. His head throbbed and he felt nerveless and spent. Step by step to the top of the staircase. Henk's head lolled and when he moved his eyes he could see the kaffir's straining face only inches away. He even fancied he could smell the musky, sweaty odour he always associated with kaffirs back home—the labourers on the farm, the road gangs. He swallowed hard to stop his gorge rising.

«... Lucky I was there or you mighta fallen right the way down and broken your neck,» Jerry was saying.

Henk twisted around to look behind him. The staircase stretched away, seemingly infinitely far into the bowels of the earth.

His anger wavered and he felt a tremor of fear, a mite of gratitude—and something that went deeper than anger, or fear or gratitude. He shook his head and it splintered with pain. Ill... weak... submissive. Submissive with his arm around a kaffir, and his gorge rising. Earlier tonight, he knew, it had been another arm—a pale, slender Swedish arm. He shook his head again.

«Easy now,» Jerry said.

No it wasn't the smell of an unwashed body—just man smell. He could feel the hard kaffir arm muscles through his shirt, and lower down a kaffir thigh brushed occasionally against his dragging legs. The bastards were all alike—built like bulls. Only good for two things: hard work and—and... It was like the Swedish tramp said tonight when she taunted him over his manhood.

Later, lying in bed, with his aching head bandaged, he thought of, and could not forget that long trek from staircase to bedroom.

*

«He had someone else with him last night,» Henk announced disgustedly. «And it wasn't even a woman this time. It was a bloody soldier.»

Eric looked at him sharply. «You weren't watching again?»

«How the hell can I stop watching? Every time I roll over in bed I can see through his window.»

«Have you ever thought of drawing the curtains?»

Henk ignored the suggestion. «It was disgusting. I could hear them half the night thumping and giggling...»

«Henk, for Christ's sake...»

«And the night before it was a white woman. Anything on two legs . . .»

«Sssh! Jerry will be here in a moment. It's almost eight.»

Henk raised himself on one elbow angrily. «And that's another thing. This business of coming every morning to see how I am. I don't like it.»

«He saved your life, you ungrateful bastard!»

«Well its got to stop. All kaffirs are the same. You give them your little finger and they take your whole arm. Here I make a special effort to be polite to him, and now he's practically moving in with us.»

Eric fixed his eyes on a point above Henk's head. «This—soldier. What was he like?»

There was a knock and Jerry popped his head around the door. Eric flushed.

«Feeling fit?» Jerry asked cheerfully.

«Yeah.»

«That's good. Your friend Eric was telling me the doctor says you can get up today.»

«Yeah?» suspiciously.

«And he was also telling me you useda exercise with weights back home.»

Henk shot a furious glance at Eric, who carefully avoided his eye. «You and Eric seem to have been having a real ball talking about me.»

Jerry laughed easily. «We were just passing the time of day. You know I have a set of weights. I use them sometimes to keep my muscles in trim. You could probably do with some toning up after five days in bed. Why don't you come to my room tonight for a little session with the weights?»

«I—don't think I'd like to do any weightlifting just yet,» Henk said in level tones.

«Well I'll be there if you change your mind. I must go now. I've an early class today.»

«I'll come downstairs with you,» Eric said suddenly. «I want to buy some milk before I turn it. I'm working overnight again.»

They walked downstairs in silence. Once or twice Jerry opened his mouth as though to speak, but it was only when they were outside that the negro said tentatively, «I don't think your friend likes me very much.»

Eric looked straight ahead. «Oh, its not that. He's just sort of . . . reserved.»

Jerry shook his head and chuckled. «You don't have to make excuses. I don't hold it against you. It's just that, coming from Trinidad, it's hard for me to think of race hate as a real thing. I'd like to know Henk better and see what makes his mind tick.»

Eric closed his eyes. «Don't bother. But you know Jerry, not all South Africans think the same as Henk.»

«Like you, for instance?» Jerry smiled. «I've wondered how you and Henk have stuck together so long. You seem to disagree on everything.»

«Not everything. I met him on the ship coming over. It was a wonderful friendly voyage and when he suggested we share a room in London I thought it would be just great. You know when you get off the question of colour you couldn't meet a nicer person than Henk. He's a little domineering, but he's wonderful company and a really dynamic personality.» His voice had grown warm and he stopped in embarrassment.

Jerry looked at Eric gravely. «I know what you mean, Eric. He's a very attractive boy.» The South African's eyes met the Trinidadian's in a long, swelling glance of understanding.

«Here comes my bus,» Jerry said abruptly. «Tell Henk he's really welcome to join me tonight and,» he smiled, «you're always welcome too—any time.»

Eric watched Jerry turn and sprint after his bus. Then he watched the red double decker until it was indistinguishable in the morning traffic haze. And all the time his mind writhed with new thoughts and new understanding.

He knew what Jerry's casual invitation meant. His stomach churned with the knowledge, and yet underlying the excitement was a vague feeling of distaste.

All the way back to the house the feeling grew. He tried to imagine himself knocking on Jerry's door, slipping inside, drawing the curtains . . . The fantasy collapsed in a sudden wave of revulsion.

And now Eric stood on the front doorstep, overwhelmed with wonderment. Try as he may, there was a barrier he could not cross. An umbilical cord of spiderweb thickness drawing him back to Johannesburg.

And because he was suddenly angry with himself, he thought spitefully, if I were a racist like Henk I'd probably have been in Jerry's room long ago, enjoying it all the more because it was something forbidden. I wouldn't be able to control myself . . .

*

Eric had reached the tube station on his way to work that night when he found he had left his wallet behind in the room. He was headachey and irritable, for he had not slept well, and his dreams had been wildly malevolent. He had dreamed he was back in Johannesburg outside the door of his home. His mother had thrown it open, but when he looked at her face it was black, and behind him he could hear Henk sneering . . .

Eric looked at his watch. It was only ten o'clock. There was still time to run back to the room to fetch his wallet.

The light was out in the second floor corridor of the house and his hand was already on the bedroom door before he noticed the «Do Not Disturb» sign hanging from the doorknob.

He paused uncertainly. It must be a mistake surely. He had left Henk reading a book on his bed less than half-an-hour ago. With sudden decision he opened the door.

The room was dark and at first he was only conscious of heavy, ragged breathing, as though someone had been running. Then he saw the outline of a figure standing by the curtain, silhouetted against the lighted square of Jerry's window. And in that square he could see Jerry, or at any rate the top half of Jerry, naked and sweating as he pitted himself against the barbells.

Eric took a step forward and a floorboard groaned. Instantly the figure by the curtain swivelled round, ripping the curtain across the window in the same movement, as Eric switched on the light.

«What the hell . . .»

«Henk, what are you doing . . .?»

Henk was dressed only in a pair of shorts, brief and straining against his body. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead, and his voice was thick. Now his face and neck were red with anger

«Why aren't you at work?»

«Mind your own business—it's my room too,» Eric said tartly as he reached for his wallet.

«Did you—did you see that baboon across there?» Henk asked quickly. «It's enough to make you puke. Showing off in front of the window dressed in nothing but a jock strap . . . bending his muscles . . .»

Suddenly Eric remembered the sign outside the door and he was pierced with jealousy. «Well if you're so bloody fascinated,» he said nastily, «why don't you go right inside his room and watch him really close up. I'm sure he'd love to have you.»

Henk clenched his fists and his face turned a deeper shade of red. «You—bastard,» he snarled. «I should . . .» Suddenly he changed his tone, and reached for a shirt lying on the bed. «I'm going out,» he bellowed. «I'm going to the nearest pub and I'm getting screaming, f—ing drunk.» He pulled on his shoes roughly. «And when I'm good and stinking, I'm grabbing the first goddamn whore I find.» He took a great sobbing breath and yelled. «I'll show her I may be only a backvelder from South Africa but I can outlast any damn kaffir.» He strode from the room, slamming the door behind him with a mighty crash.

For a long time Eric stood in the room looking at the door. It was only when he glanced at his watch and realized he was late already that he moved to open it.

*

The sun was casting long morning shadows when Eric returned from work.

He was in no hurry to get to bed. He still felt sick and ashamed over last night. What right had he, of all people, to cast stones at Henk.

Chastened, he stood at the door of the room, with a rehearsed speech of apology on his lips. He entered, and stood crestfallen on the threshold.

The room was empty. Henk's bed had not been slept in.

Now he could imagine the scene. Henk, asleep in some filthy garret between soiled sheets and beside him a stringy, toothless hag going through his wallet with a speculative eye.

Eric wandered to the window and stood miserably with his elbows on the sill.

Then he stiffened, and leaned forward.

The morning sun had thrown a shaft of light into Jerry's room. It cut a passage through the dancing motes and left a puddle of sunshine on the sheets thrown back so carelessly.

Eric raised himself on tip toe for a better view.

It traced the two naked forms in bed, both sleeping with the blissful intensity of children. It picked up a hand, with long, slender, dancer's fingers, entwined amongst a small jungle of matted, ginger-blond chest hair.

And in the shadow two heads were drawn together, one beige, almond-eyed and full-lipped—the other fair, and bronzed, and crewcut . . .

English Short Story Contest. A slight misunderstanding. *Not* the fact that the winners of the first and second prizes had submitted several stories was responsible for their getting the prizes but every single one of these five stories would have received the same price for its single merits. The Circle

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