Nadine Gordimer. "The Moment Before the Gun Went Off"

The South African policy of apartheid, of separating whites, blacks and coloured, gradually came to an end in the early 1990s and Nelson Mandela became the first president in the new South Africa based on majority rule. As a system of political oppression apartheid existed for more than 50 years. The system was put under pressure from the outside and it was fought from inside South Africa. Militant blacks were one group fighting it. Another grouping consisted of radical and liberal whites who openly voiced their criticism. Among these, Nadine Gordimer played a prominent part in her writing. Her political visions of a post- apartheid South Africa led to the banning of several of her books. However, despite the censorship of South Africa she received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991.

In the following short story by her, set in the years preceding the fall of apartheid, Marais van der Vyver, a white South African, shoots one of his black farm labourers and kills him. The death attracts considerable publicity, and Marais soon discovers there are a lot of people who have their own interpretation of the events. But there is one fact they could never guess - and which he can never tell them.

"The Moment Before the Gun Went Off"
Nadine Gordimer

Marais Van der Vyver shot one of his farm labourers, dead.

An accident. There are accidents with guns every day of the week: children playing a fatal game with a father's revolver in the cities where guns are domestic objects, and hunting mishaps like this one, in the country. But these won't be reported all over the world. Van der Vyver knows his will be. He knows that the story of the Afrikaner farmer - a regional Party leader and Commandant of the local security commando - he, shooting a black man who worked for him will fit exactly their version of South Africa. It's made for them. They'll be able to use it in their boycott and divestment campaigns. It'll be another piece of evidence in their truth about the country. The papers at home will quote the story as it has appeared in the overseas press, and in the back-and-forth he and the black man will become those crudely-drawn figures on anti-apartheid banners, units in statistics of white brutality against the blacks quoted at United Nations - he, whom they will gleefully call 'a leading member' of the ruling Party.

People in the farming community understand how he must feel. Bad enough to have killed a man, without helping the Party's, the government's, the country's enemies, as well.

They see the truth of that. They know, reading the Sunday papers, that when Van der Vyver is quoted saying he is 'terribly shocked', he will 'look after the wife and children', none of

those Americans and English, and none of those people at home who want to destroy the white man's power will believe him. And how they will sneer when he even says of the farm boy (according to one paper, if you can trust any of those reporters), 'He was my friend. I always took him hunting with me: Those city and overseas people don't know it's true: farmers usually have one particular black boy they like to take along with them in the lands: you could call it a kind of friend, yes, friends are not only your own white people, like yourself, you take into your house, pray with in church and work with on the Party committee. But how can those others know that? They don't want to know it. They think all blacks are like the big-mouth agitators in town. And Van der Vyver's face, in the photographs, strangely opened by distress - everyone in the district remembers Marais Van der Vyver as a little boy who would go away and hide himself if he caught you smiling at him. And everyone knows him now as a man who hides any change of expression round his mouth behind a thick, soft moustache, and in his eyes, by always looking at some object in hand, while concentrating on what he is saying, or while listening to you. It just goes to show what shock can do. When you look at the newspaper photographs you feel like apologising; as if you had started in on some room where you should not be.

There will be an inquiry. There had better be - to stop the assumption of yet another case of brutality against farm workers, although there's nothing in doubt - an accident, and all the facts fully admitted by Van der Vyver. He made a statement when he arrived at the police station with the dead man in his bakkie.

Captain Beetge knows him well, of course; he gave him brandy. He was shaking, this big, calm, clever son of Willem Van der Vyver, who inherited the old man's best farm. The black was stone dead. Nothing to be done for him. Beetge will not tell anyone that after the brandy, Van der Vyver wept. He sobbed, snot running onto his hands, like a dirty kid. The Captain was ashamed for him, and walked out to give him a chance to recover himself.

Marais Van der Vyver had left his house at three in the afternoon to cull a buck from the family of Kudu he protects in the bush areas of his farm. He is interested in wild life and sees it as the farmer's sacred duty to raise game as well as cattle. As usual, he called at his shed workshop to pick up Lucas, a twenty-year-old farmhand who had shown mechanical aptitude and whom Van der Vyver himself had taught to maintain tractors and other farm machinery. He hooted. And Lucas followed the familiar routine, jumping onto the back of the truck. He liked to travel standing up there, spotting game before his employer did. He would lean forward, braced against the cab below him.

Van der Vyver had a rifle and .300 ammunition beside him in the cab. The rifle was one of his father's, because his own was at the gunsmith's in town.

Since his father died (Beetge's sergeant wrote 'passed on') no-one had used the rifle and so when he took it from a cupboard he was sure it was not loaded. His father had never allowed a loaded gun in the house. He himself had been taught since childhood never to

ride with a loaded weapon in a vehicle. But this gun was loaded. On a dirt track, Lucas thumped his fist on the cab roof three times to signal: look left. Having seen the whiteripple-marked flank of a Kudu, and its fine horns raking through disguising bush, Van der Vyver drove rather fast over a pot- hole. The jolt fired the rifle. Upright, it was pointing straight through the cab roof at the head of Lucas...

That is the statement of what happened. Although a man of such standing in the district, Van der Vyver had to go through the ritual of swearing that it was the truth. It has gone on record, and will be there in the archive of the local police station as long as Van der Vyver lives, and beyond that, through the lives of his children, Magnus, Helena and Karel - unless things in the country get worse, the example of black mobs in the towns spreads to the rural areas and the place is burned down as many urban police stations have been. Because nothing the government can do will appease the agitators and the whites who encourage them. Nothing satisfies them, in the cities: blacks can sit and drink in white hotels now, the Immorality Act has gone, blacks can sleep with whites... It's not even a crime any more.

Van der Vyver has a high barbed security fence round his farmhouse and garden which his wife, Alida, thinks spoils completely the effect of her artificial stream with its tree-ferns beneath the Jacarandas. There is an aerial soaring like a flag- pole in the back yard. All his vehicles, including the truck in which the black man died, have aerials that swing like whips when the driver hits a pot-hole. They are part of the security system the farmers in the district maintain, each farm in touch with every other by radio, twenty-four hours out of twenty-four. It has already happened that infiltrators from over the border have mined remote farm roads, killing white farmers and their families out on their own property for a Sunday picnic. The pot-hole could have set off a landmine, and Van der Vyver might have died with his farm boy. When neighbours use the communications system to call up and say they are sorry about 'that business' with one of Van der Vyver's boys, there goes unsaid: it could have been worse.

It is obvious from the quality and fittings of the coffin that the farmer has provided money for the funeral. And an elaborate funeral means a great deal to blacks; look how they will deprive themselves of the little they have, in their life-time, keeping up payments to a burial society so they won't go in boxwood to an unmarked grave. The young wife is pregnant (of course) and another little one, wearing red shoes several sizes too large, leans under her jutting belly. He is too young to understand what has happened, what he is witnessing that day. But neither whines nor plays about. He is solemn without knowing why. Blacks expose small children to everything. They don't protect them from the sight of fear and pain the way whites do theirs.

It is the young wife who rolls her head and cries like a child, sobbing on the breast of this relative and that. All present work for Van der Vyver or are the families of those who work. And in the weeding and harvest seasons, the women and children work for him, too, carried - wrapped in their blankets, on a truck, singing - at sunrise to the fields. The dead man's

mother is a woman who can't be more than in her late thirties (they start bearing children at puberty) but she is heavily mature in a black dress between her own parents, who were already working for old Van der Vyver when Marais, like their daughter, was a child. The parents hold her as if she were a prisoner or a crazy woman to be restrained. But she says nothing, does nothing. She does not look up, she does not look at Van der Vyver, whose gun went off in the truck. She stares at the grave. Nothing will make her look up, there need be no fear that she will look up, at him. His wife, Alida, is beside him. To show the proper respect, as for any white funeral, she is wearing the navy-blue-and-cream hat she wears to church this summer. She is always supportive, although he doesn't seem to notice it. This coldness and reserve - his mother says he didn't mix well as a child - she accepts for herself but regrets that it has prevented him from being nominated, as he should be, to stand as the Party's parliamentary candidate for the district. He does not let her clothing, or that of anyone else gathered closely, make contact with him. He, too, stares at the grave. The dead man's mother and he stare at the grave in communication like that between the black man outside and the white man inside the cab before the gun went off.

The moment before the gun went off was a moment of high excitement shared through the roof of the cab, as the bullet was to pass, between the young black man outside and the white farmer inside the vehicle. There were such moments, without explanation, between them, although often around the farm the farmer would pass the young man without returning a greeting, as if he did not recognize him. When the bullet went off, what Van der Vyver saw was the Kudu stumble in fright at the report and gallop away. Then he heard the thud behind him, and past the window saw the young man fall out of the vehicle. He was sure he had leapt up and toppled - in fright, like the buck. The farmer was almost laughing with relief, ready to tease, as he opened his door, it did not seem possible that a bullet passing through the roof could have done harm.

The young man did not laugh with him at his own fright. The farmer carried him in his arms, to the truck. He was sure, sure he could not be dead. But the young black man's blood was all over the farmer's clothes, soaking against his flesh as he drove.

How will they ever know, when they file newspaper clippings, evidence, proof, when they look at the photographs and see his face! Guilty! They are right! How will they know, when the police stations burn with all the evidence of what has happened now, and what the law made a crime in the past. How could they know that they do not know - anything. The young black callously shot through the negligence of the white man was not the farmer's boy; he was his son.