

COMEDY IN THE CAPE



a different way of seeing

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Inspired by Bertha, heroine for those who dare to be free

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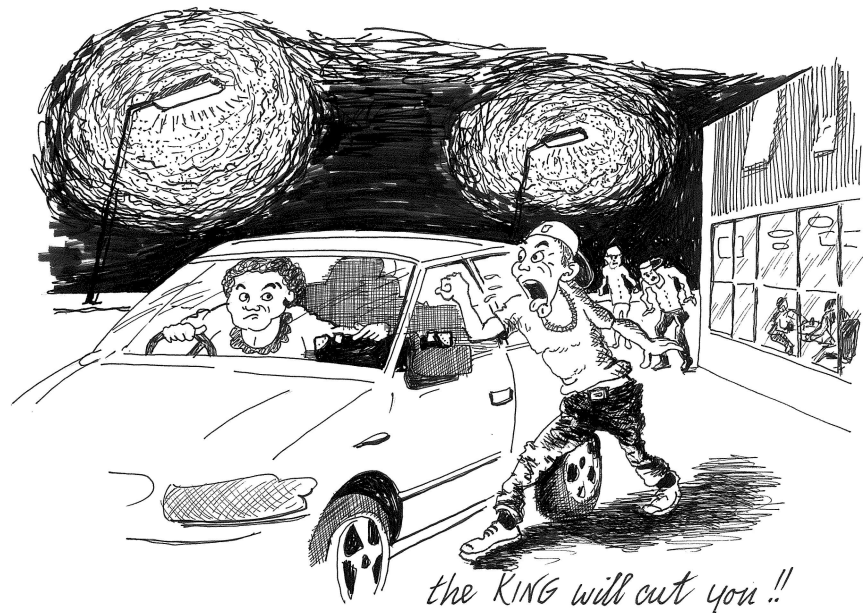
If you enjoyed reading about *The Chalk Man* in November, there is more to see on my YT channel [Bertha's Books ~it's all about the books~](#). And by the time you receive this newsletter, there will be another video uploaded, perhaps the one on *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelly or my discussion with writer-translator (and prior to that publicist, actor's agent, copywriter, English teacher) Katherine Gregor.

In 2027, these newsletters will be scheduled for the 3rd of the month. I am planning to follow a similar format as 2026 with the

addition that I will include, from time to time, unpublished excerpts of my fiction writing (flash fiction or extracts from a forthcoming novel). I will also include some of my non-fiction (especially if it's behind a paywall!) and I am pleased to say that the non-fiction book co-authored with Grant Ramsey is progressing and will be freely downloadable when its published next year.

In this newsletter, I'm including one of the published episodes from *Bertha's Law*. I know some of you may have already read it, but I think you may be interested to hear about the background.

The episode is *King of Kaaps* and it required a fair amount of research. I wanted to get the setting in the story just right, so I drove to the locations where the events take place. There are the ones in Grassy Park like the service station where the German tourist was mugged and the Fat Boys gang members meet. There's the Apostolic Church and the MacDonalds where the events depicted in the drawing below transpired.



Then there was the issue of getting the language authentic. The Kaaps language, it turns out, is more than a dialect. Academics believe it to be a distinct language, and they have produced a three-way English-Afrikaans-Kaaps dictionary. I used a lot of the Kaaps

vernacular and slang in the story and there is a glossary of terms at the end. There is also a short section about the cultural richness of the region and it may be helpful to take a look at that and the glossary before reading the story, especially if you don't know that region.

It seems that *King of Kaaps* is one of the episodes that readers outside of Africa find really funny. They often ask me about it and the scholar who translated the book into French told me he thought it was hilarious. As an FYI, Africans of all ethnicities seem to find others like *The Hunter* or one of the Karoo episodes more interesting.

King of Kaaps was also, I think, the very first thing I wrote that ended up being published. I have a sentimental attachment to it because of that. Now, reading it again I see how innocent and unbridled the writing is. I recognise how much I have developed and as any writer will tell you, that is a very important part of writing.

Until 2027 then, and our best wishes to you.

Bertha and me.

King of Kaaps

Near Cape Town, South Africa

They waited for Spares at the first bus shelter on Victoria Road. Exactly where he told them to. The 'gamatjies' he called them. The police called them the Fat Boys gang, although in truth only one of them was fat. Eier was fat. 'Was', because the police shot him.

"You cannot miss him, ja," the German tourist said about Eier. He meant, of course, that they wouldn't miss seeing him. Eier was one of the fattest people he had ever seen. But maybe the police misunderstood him. Or maybe Eier did point a gun at them. The police told News24 that the German man was lost ("Never take the shortest way on Google maps when you in South Africa, ja" he later wrote on Facebook) and stopped to ask for directions in the Bonjour Café at a Total garage between Grassy Park and Plumstead. This was an

unfortunate decision, because the garage was also where the Fat Boys met middleman—who sells to the snyman—to drop off a month's supply of tik.

They were waiting for nearly an hour for middleman when the German man stopped his BMW two parking bays away. Eier had been moaning all this time and Spares told him to get out and get some fresh air. Standing under a milkwood tree, Eier watched the German man pacing up and down between the parked cars and the patch of dying kikuyu grass, all the while complaining loudly into his cell phone. After a one-sided negotiation Eier helped himself to the man's fancy sunglasses and wristwatch, and his iPhone, and the man fled into the Bonjour Café. He didn't have to wait long. The police were fast. They usually are when there's a tourist being mugged on the Cape Flats. Spares was furious and told Bertha to get the hell out of there, without Eier, who was still going through the contents of the man's BMW. If he was going to be a doos and rob a tourist in daylight, then they weren't going to wait. And so, Eier was stuck. The police found him easily enough, hiding behind the blacktips growing on the edge of the garage parking.

From that moment, Spares trusted Bertha. He always thought she was a solid antie and having an antie was a good thing. A bunch of Kapiés driving aimlessly around Cape Town are trouble, but having an antie as the driver made all the difference. He also liked that she came from up north, Tanzania or Malawi somewhere, not a local skollie, which meant she sounded educated, less Kaaps. What really impressed Spares was how she followed orders. When he told her to floor it out the Total garage, police sirens wailing in the background, she drove like a crazy woman. Eyes like a cokehead tourist. Mason said she looked like a tsotsi caught in the crossfire. She could handle pressure and Spares liked this girl. No way she was a snaai.

After Eier was shot, the Fat Boys had to find a different place to meet middleman. The new place was perfect—the Old Apostolic Church in Grassy Park. Out of sight, and Mason's mother ran the meals-on-wheels at the church so there was always a good reason for them to be there.

Bertha manoeuvred the VW polo under a tree behind the church.

"Is this okay, Jerome?" She always called him by his real name; Spares was something the heavies used. Caleb said he wouldn't mind who called him Spares, it was the name the kids gave him at school on account of the size of his head, but Bertha associated it more with his habit of treating everyone like a spare part. She didn't want to use that name. She didn't want to be a spare part.

Business was booming and Spares was smiling. Middleman was the second drop off for the day. And it wasn't just tik anymore. Fentanyl, benzos, coke and ecstasy for the rich kids. Rhino horns and pangolin scales for the Chinese. And, for the first time, a crate of freshly harvested perlemoen waiting in the trunk to be dropped off in Parow. The Chinese loved that stuff. The briefcase, heavy with cash, that Spares received for the first drop off was safely tucked under his seat and the box packed with tik and cocaine rocked gently between Caleb and Mason at the back. Even without Eier it was still a squeeze, but Spares refused to get a bigger car. Don't get flash, that's the first step on your way to jail.

Middleman drew up beside them and let his window down. He opened the briefcase on his lap to reveal banded stacks of Euros, Dollars and Rands. Mason craned forward to catch a glimpse. Caleb handed the box beside him to Spares, who pushed it through the window.

"There's an extra brick just for you," Spares said, tapping the lid of the box and making a squelching sound with the side of his mouth. Middleman took the box and passed the briefcase to Spares. After nearly a year of faithful transactions between them there was no need for further discussion and middleman was gone less than a minute after he arrived.

"How much?" Caleb blurted out.

"How much in Rands?" said Mason still leaning forward between the two front seats. That was, after all, what determined their cut.

"Shurrup you two!" Spares was irritated by the same questions every time. He opened the briefcase and caressed the bundles

arranged in rows; each one secured with an elastic band. He plucked the two stacks of 100 Rand notes from the case and tossed one to each of the men at the back.

"That's at least 10 grand each. Don't do anything stupid." He placed the briefcase beside the Glock that lay within easy reach at his feet. "Let's drop these two clowns and go see the King."

Bertha drove in the direction of the McDonalds, where the two gamatjies always celebrated payday with a cheeseburger meal.

"The King? You going to see the King? With her?" It took Caleb a few minutes to grasp the gravity of Spares' last statement.

"Yes, this antie's good for business. It hasn't gone unnoticed that the cops hardly stop us anymore. And that means fewer bribes," said Spares. "The King wants to meet her. Maybe it's time for a promotion," he giggled and pushed Bertha playfully on the shoulder.

"Lucky you," said Mason. "He controls this whole show. Grassy Park is his territory."

"He's the King," affirmed Caleb.

"The King of Kaaps!" Caleb and Mason chuckled.

Bertha pulled into the McDonalds parking and turned off the engine.

"Kaaps?" she looked at Spares.

"Yes, that's us," he said. "Don't you know? We're all Kapies."

"The cursed Kaaps," Mason said mockingly, "screwed from all sides."

"Too white for the blacks and too black for the whites," added Caleb. "God forgot about us, why else did we end up here at the arse end of the world," he mused and shooed Mason out the car.

"King gives you work and if you act right and he trusts you, like he does this antie, you can go far," Spares reminded them before the door slammed shut. "I'm going to take a crap," he said to Bertha, "wait here." He pushed the Glock into the front of his jeans and covered it with his shirt.

Bertha followed the movements of the three men through the glass front of the McDonalds. Spares entered the toilet while Caleb and Mason pointed at the brightly coloured menu behind the woman wearing a frilly white hairnet at the counter. Bertha watched them find a seat at a window in line with the car. Her gaze drifted to the briefcase on the floor, and she thought about the second case beneath the seat. She reached down and pulled it out, placed it on the passenger seat and flicked open the latches. Rows of one hundred denomination Euro and US dollar bills were squeezed into its interior. She quickly shut the case, placed it beside the other one on the floor and returned her gaze to the two men sitting at the window. Caleb was watching circumspectly. He said something to Mason and stood up, exited the MacDonalds and walked slowly in her direction, a scowl creeping over his face. Bertha saw Mason bustling Spares out the toilet. He was frantically buckling his trousers.

Bertha seized the moment. She started the engine and thrust the car into gear. Caleb broke into a run. He knocked furiously on the window as the car lurched forward.

"The King will cut you; you dumb bitch!" he screamed, saliva spraying onto the window. Spares raced out, snatched the Glock from his trousers and fired a shot just as the VW bounced over the curb and disappeared.

Bertha kept going, past Athlone and onto the M7 north, focussed on getting as far as possible from the mayhem that was unfolding behind her. Spares alerted his heavies in Grassy park, as well as the private security on King's payroll. They would be looking for her. And they had faster cars. And guns. Lots of guns! First, they would comb Grassy Park and then fan out on the highways, guessing correctly that she would have chosen to escape north, either up to Namibia or maybe in the direction of Joburg. Where else could she go?

Bertha exited the M7 near Malmesbury and took the quickest route to Paternoster. Despite being way off the main routes, it was a minor tourist attraction and being a foreigner there wouldn't have raised any questions. Half an hour later she entered the tiny fishing village. She drove the length of it, noting the last of the whitewashed houses with a

guesthouse sign plastered above its brightly coloured door. The road angled down to a rocky beach, and she stopped the car on the shoulder of the road. She opened the trunk, lugged the crate onto the rocks and tipped its contents over the edge. A gentle splash, and the perlemoen disappeared into the darkness below. Bertha returned to the guesthouse and parked around the side of the building, out of sight of anyone passing along the road. The sun was a flaming disc, already kissing the deep blue on the horizon, and it cloaked the house in a rusty orange hue. An elderly woman emerged from the front door and strode towards Bertha as she climbed out the car.

"Am I right in guessing there might be space for a few days?" Bertha said as the woman approached.

"Yes, and you welcome," the woman spoke slowly and flashed a broad smile. "I'm Bess."

"Thank you," said Bertha. She reached in and grabbed the two briefcases.

"Any other luggage I can help you with?"

"No, um, thanks," said Bertha. "Light traveller."

"I see. Sometimes it's better that way. Follow me," said Bess. "I think I'll give you the beach cottage. You will like it. Very isolated. And it's got a lovely view of the ocean."

Bess led Bertha down the coarsely gravelled path lined with protea bushes that grew proudly in the sandy soil.

"You sound foreign," said Bess. "Where are you headed?"

"I'm going to Joburg and will probably just keep going north after that. I thought I'll take the quiet roads through the Karoo. Maybe stop at a few towns. Colesberg. It's an interesting town."

"That it is."

"And you right, I'm not from here," said Bertha, "which reminds me. Will you take Dollars? Euros maybe?"

Bess paused for a moment. "Sure," she smiled again, "that will be just fine."

They stopped at an arched entrance, covered with bougainvillea, leading onto the deck of a small house. "Here's your cottage," she said. "You didn't tell me your name."

"Bertha."

"Bertha. How nice." Bess said. "You know, I think we're going to be friends."

Glossary

<i>Gamatjie</i>	a derogatory name for someone of mixed race in the western Cape region of South Africa.
<i>Kaaps (also called Afrikaaps or more colloquially Kapie-taal)</i>	a language spoken mostly in the western Cape, South Africa. In the episode <i>King of Kaaps</i> , the following terms are slang and found in Kaaps or Afrikaans and often used in other African languages: <i>snaai</i> = snitch; <i>antie</i> = aunt; <i>doos</i> = a vulgar insult; <i>skollie</i> = petty criminal or troublemaker.
<i>Perlemoen</i>	the name for abalone in Kaaps and Afrikaans.
<i>Snyman</i>	slang term for a drug pusher. Snyman is a common Afrikaans surname and is used as slang for a drug dealer because the word ' <i>sny</i> ' means ' <i>cut</i> ' as in ' <i>cut</i> ' a line of cocaine.
<i>Tik</i>	a methamphetamine drug in parts of South Africa (especially Cape Town) and stereotypically associated with gangsterism in the region known as the Cape Flats.
<i>Tsotsi</i>	generic word for a criminal in South Africa. Probably of Sotho origin, it is found in most languages in southern Africa.

Background and Context

The Kaaps language has its roots in the 1500s and emerged as a language in the Khoisan, Malay, Indonesian, Malagasy, and African communities many of whom were enslaved by Dutch colonists. They developed their own creolized version of Dutch (including words from other languages) to keep conversations private. Kaaps was later sidelined for sociopolitical reasons but it is spoken by millions of people (sometimes pejoratively called Kapies) and linguists consider Kaaps a unique language because it is historically and culturally distinct from Afrikaans, which emerged much later (see the [Trilingual Dictionary of Kaaps project](#)).

It is important to mention the long, complex and sometimes painful history of the mixed-race community in South Africa because it provides a backdrop for some of what the characters in this episode say. The Kaaps label is usually substituted by the apartheid term 'coloured' for people of this community. The term 'coloured', therefore, is rejected by many in the community. See: "I reject the racial construct 'coloured' and its stranglehold on people's lives" by Dennis Cruywagen in Daily Maverick, 29 September 2024. With respect to what Caleb says about being "Too white for the blacks and too black for the whites" readers may be interested in Ismail Lagardien's "SA's Coloured People Crushed Between Ethnonationalism and African Nationalism" May 2024 Daily Maverick. His memoirs "Too White to be Coloured, Too Coloured to be Black" are a helpful insight to [what it means to be 'coloured'](#).

The western Cape in South Africa is infamous for gangsterism. This may come as a surprise to visitors to Cape Town, a tourist city, but the difference between the wealthy and deprived areas is stark. The areas known as the Cape Flats are sometimes considered a hotbed of gangsterism but of course this occurs everywhere in Cape Town and beyond. Gangsterism and organised crime syndicates in Cape Town are often associated with drugs like 'tik' and smuggling. The perlemoen mentioned in this episode is commonly harvested illegally and shipped to Asia, but there are many other smuggled goods from cigarettes to gems, foreign currency, and animals or animal parts, e.g., pangolins and rhino horns.

It must also be said apropos the characters that the Cape Flats are often viewed homogenously by non-residents, but the reality is very different. The Cape Flats, in terms of its human population, is one of the most diverse populations in the world. See writings by Ismail Lagardien e.g., "From the Ottoman Empire to the BoKaap" August 2023, Vrye Weekblad. For stories by people from the Cape Flats see [this page here](#).

I don't know how Bertha initially got involved with the Fat Boys Gang, although I'm certain she wasn't motivated by criminality. We know she was first in the western cape region for other reasons (see episode 2 *A Dozen Spotted Eagle-Owls*). Later, perhaps, she became aware of the problem of animal (parts) smuggling and was drawn into the underworld via that route. But then realizing the dangers, she decided to vanish, taking the gangster's money with her!

Pierre



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