

Statement

Christine Lucia

(Breaking the Silence: Positive Survivors, ed. POWA, pp.48-55 (2006). Johannesburg: Jacana Press)

‘You were driving down De Villiers Street – was it De Villiers? When two men came towards the car with guns?’

Inspector Khumalo wrote in capital letters on scraps of paper from an A4 exercise book. She had just finished explaining why I had to make a second Statement, why the one I had made two days earlier had not been done according to correct procedure.

‘I wasn’t driving. We were stationary. We had just fixed a puncture and they must have been watching us, waiting until we had finished. There were three men.’

‘De Villiers Street?’

‘Yes, the corner of De Villiers and Loop. Well, not right on the corner, just below it. You see...’

I drew a small diagram of the cross-roads. The officer barely glanced at it. It was as if I was beginning to play noughts and crosses. I stopped.

‘Did they all have guns?’

‘Yes. There were three men, not two.’

‘So while you were driving the car along De Villiers Street these men came towards you. Did they all have guns?’

‘Well, I wasn’t actually driving. You see, we’d just fixed a puncture. We had stopped to do that. We had finished and were about to set off again.’

The officer wrote, slowly and carefully. I followed her gaze. At the top of the page was written:

I, Susan Margaret Hill, a white female of 55 years, state under oath that:

1. I was driving...

‘You stopped to fix a puncture?’

‘Yes. We stopped to fix a puncture in De Villiers Street. It was about 11pm. Maybe 11.15.’

23h15, she wrote.

‘And you were with your husband?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where was he sitting?’

‘He was next to me in the front. And our friend was in the back.’

‘Three people?’

‘There were three of us. A friend was in the back.’

I gave the names and more details while she wrote:

I was driving and my husband Dr Julian Hunt was on the passenger seat to my left. Our family friend Mr Charles Wood was seated in the passenger seat to the back.

It sounded like a picnic. Once upon a time three people set off for the woods in their car. Mrs Hunt was driving. Her husband sat next to her, her friend sat in the back. I wonder what was in the picnic basket.

‘We had just stopped to fix a puncture.’

‘Who fixed the puncture?’

‘My husband.’

‘So you all got out of the car?’

‘Yes. We were very nervous.’

As I said it I felt nervous – a pang across my abdomen. I used to get the same feeling before exams, or when I played in school concerts. It was odd: this was the first time since the incident that I experienced such a feeling. Not a pain exactly but something gripping my stomach, a feeling of dread, a feeling that I was about to be sick.

‘Was anyone around?’

‘No, the street was completely deserted. It was a terrible part of town, terribly dangerous. Some cars passed us – actually two police vans passed, and we tried to flag them down but they just kept on driving. They ignored us.’

I tried not to sound peeved. My husband had been very angry on this point when we made our first Statement. He really rubbed it in while we were talking to that first police officer: how the police were useless, we tried to stop a police van and it just drove on, so

much for the bloody police!... I could see his comments didn't go down too well with the officer. Perhaps that was why we were making another Statement.

'Shoo!' Inspector Khumalo shook her head sympathetically. I was quite surprised at her reaction.

'And then your husband fixed the puncture. Where was the spare wheel?'

'In the boot.'

'And the tools? Also in the boot?'

'Yes.'

She wrote carefully:

I got out of the driver's seat and my husband and friend also got out; my husband took the spare wheel and tools from the boot and fixed up the puncture.

I recalled the scene: Julian huffing with the spanner trying to undo the very tight nuts, suddenly throwing his coat off onto the ground as he got hotter. Charles wringing his hands and looking up and down the street. Me hovering trying to make light of it and crack jokes.

'After you fixed the puncture what did you do?'

'We put the damaged tyre in the boot together with the tools, and got back into the car.'

'And you drove off?'

'We were about to start the car when...'

‘Who was driving. Was it you again?’

‘Yes.’

‘So everyone sat in their places as before?’

‘Yes.’ (On with the picnic.)

‘And what happened next?’

‘Three men came running towards the car with guns.’

I tried to close the door and start the car, but I couldn’t. I keep seeing the one I front reaching inside his jacket pocket for the pistol. This image keeps playing, over and over in my mind. It was odd. I didn’t feel afraid then. Just a sense of ‘ah, now it’s happening to us.’ I also remember a voice near me saying ‘oh no.’ and now when I think of that I feel sick again. I feel panic-stricken. One of them was very young and aggressive. ‘Start the car, start the car you fucking bitch, start the car, come on, start the car, quick, start the fucking car.’ He almost pulled me out of the seat, forced me to stand up. I slipped on the kerb. As I straightened up getting my foot back into my shoe, uncertain what to do next, a small tight fist came very quickly towards my face.

I felt a slight shift in my lower teeth. My teeth are broken, I thought. But it was the small plate the dentist had just fitted. He spent ages trying to make it feel snug, as if I couldn’t feel it. Now I felt it. Something had come loose, or been broken, I wasn’t sure. I tried grinding my teeth to get it back into place. ‘Start the car, start the car you fucking bitch or I’ll kill you.’ What should I tell Detective Khumalo of all this? Everything happened so fast. How many times would she write the word fucking? After about a minute I was aware of blood on my lips and tried to clean it off with my tongue. My lower lip was swelling up. It stung. All this while the young man screamed about starting the car,

waving his gun at my head. I found myself back in the driver's seat. Really trying, very hard, to start the car. He had my handbag, our wallets, cell-phones, now of course, he wanted the car too. Perhaps he wanted my life. I tried and tried, but the car just wouldn't start.

'What was happening to the others?'

'I didn't really see.'

'You were busy with this man?'

'Well, yes.'

'And the others?'

'One of them threw my friend to the ground I learnt afterwards, and pointed a gun at his head and got his wallet and cell-phone off him. He spent ten minutes lying with his face on the dirt, behind a rubbish tip, a gun at his head. But I didn't actually see all this.'

'And your husband? Was the other man busy with him?'

'I suppose so.'

When I couldn't start the car suddenly my husband started leaning over from the back seat, leaning right over me, trying to help start the car. His body was completely bent over, forcing me sideways. I remember looking at his backside on my left, and seeing a gun right next to my face on the other side. It still wouldn't start. 'Start the fucking car or I'll fucking shoot you.' 'Point the remote at the mirror,' I kept saying, 'then it'll start. It *will* start, I promise.' When it failed again the gun was jabbing on my shoulder and the young man was screaming again. 'This is it, this is it, this time I'm going to fucking shoot you, you fucking bitch.' I suggested taking the key out and putting it in again. The other

man who had been busy with my husband got into the driver's seat. Then it seemed we were all giving this man lessons, somehow. We were trying very hard to help him start the car. I looked at Detective Khumalo, still calmly writing her capitals. What on earth had she made of all this?

'Then what happened?' she asked.

'Well, suddenly a tow-van came down the street, out of nowhere, right past the car.'

The hijackers made us all get inside the car at this point. 'Get in the car!' shouted the aggressive one, shoving me in. 'Get in the fucking car! Now! You fucking bitch!' I think that was my 'Oh no' moment. A sudden vision of our bodies dumped somewhere outside Johannesburg, found two days later and reported on the 7 o'clock News. There was a lot more shouting and swearing. I wasn't sure how to get all this across to Detective Khumalo, who continued to write passively, putting the scrambled sequence of events into a neat order.

'Then what happened? How did you escape?'

'They just ran away.'

'They ran away?'

We learnt afterwards that the young couple in the tow-truck had seen us and had driven round the block, having an urgent discussion. 'Did you see that? Those people looked as if they were in trouble hey? Those men had guns. Something not right there. But if they have guns, it's not safe. Let's go on. Why get involved? We don't want to get hurt. Shame, man, those old people need our help.' Then they phoned their tow-truck buddies at the garage round the corner.

So that was how it happened that three tow-vans suddenly came down the street heading towards the car. Not fast, but quite obviously coming to our aid. The young man got his last word in as the hijackers ran off. ‘You fucking bitch. *Fuck you!*’

‘So they ran off when the vans came?’

‘Yes.’

Inspector Khumalo stopped writing, put her pen down, and looked ahead of her. She paused for a long time. ‘God must have been looking after you,’ she said finally. ‘This never happens, I tell you, that people get saved, just like that.’

How I hate that sentimental crap about God. I think it was because we kept relatively calm, I wanted to say, kept the men engaged in conversation, kept our heads. Nothing to do with fucking God. But she was quite sincere, and I let her have her way. After all, we were alive, and could afford to be magnanimous.

‘Yes, someone must have been watching over us,’ I said gently.

We went through a few more points, then she asked me to read through the Statement. Her handwriting was sometimes difficult to make out and the sentences were short, clinical. I corrected ‘two men’ to ‘three’, and ‘we were driving when...’ to ‘we were about to start off again when...’, corrected the spelling of Julian.

The Detective was a short woman, youngish, good looking, and she had been very calm. Even doing this piece of routine police work, asking her questions, drawing out such a difficult story, she had been a patient, kindly listener. This was unusual. At the police station two days earlier the first Statement had been a farce – a semi-literate cop, pissed off with my husband’s sour comments about the bloody police, not interested in what had happened to us, just getting through his work as quickly as possible.

‘You are very unusual, Inspector Khumalo, I said. For a member of the police force. I mean, well, quite... sympathetic.’

She stared ahead again. A few moments passed. ‘A couple of years ago,’ she said, ‘I lost my husband in a hijacking. So I know all about this. I know how awful it is, what it feels like. I had taken the kids to Durban and my husband was going to join us the next day. He was held up that night and they shot him dead. I’m telling you, you were very lucky. It never happens – people just running away like that.’

Silence fell between us. I put my hand gently on her arm. The picnic was over.

And then the nauseous, panic-stricken feeling in my stomach started to come back, in terrible earnest now, as I signed the Statement.