

DENIS BECKETT

# WHITE MAN WALKING



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## WHITE MAN WALKING



### 1. IN THE BEGINNING

**A**LL I KNEW OF DURBAN'S CATO MANOR WAS THAT ITS RECORD OF riot, razing and broken heads is several lengths longer than any other township in South Africa, which is saying a bit. A mega-effort to straighten it out has now been made and is drawing to a close. The straighteners, Cato Manor Development Association, commissioned a bucketload of academic and professional reports on the results. They decided also to include one wild-side report, which they called "The View From the Street". They wanted the impressions of a total outsider, uncluttered by prior baggage.

"No holds barred", they said, "we'll fly you down, we'll give you a car, we'll book a hotel, you'll take as long as you like, you'll say what you see."

I said: "I'll pass on the hotel. Is there any sort of guest-house in Cato Manor itself?"

"No, nothing like that."

"You can surely find someone who has a bed available."

"Er, yes, if that's what you want."

“Yep. The view doesn’t stop when night falls. In fact, let’s pass on the car too.”

There was a pause. “Well, if you insist.”

“Sure. You get fuller view without a windscreen. Anyway Iphi Imoto, where is your car, is one of the few Zulu questions I know how to answer. Ngezinyawo, I’m going by foot.”

## 2. ENGLISHLY ENGLISH LIKE PIKESTAFFS

**W**HICH IS HOW I GET TO BE STANDING ON A COASTAL HILLTOP with a panorama before me, a choir behind, and geniality all around.

The panorama is spectacular - hills forever, displayed to perfection by a glorious winter day. The choir is impromptu. They are children singing *Ring a ring of rosies* with more nod towards the “exuberant” school of music than the “tuneful”. The geniality comes from a free-flowing, self-selecting group of people joining and unjoining the business of explaining Cato Manor to a novice.

There are differences between explainers and explainee. I go ooh aah ooh about the topography. They worry about my grasp on reality. They already know that this is a strange umlungu. No car, imagine! And all those questions. But this raving about hills is the limit. Hills? Hills are hills.

The children sing on. *Pocketful of posies. Tisha, tisha, all fall down.* They replay this track several times, collapsing with gleeful whoomps on the *all fall down*. It’s very English; are Zulu nursery rhymes vanishing already? Englishly English too, a whiff of pikestaffs and mead. You’d expect the theme-song of an American soapie.

It is also macabre. The rosies were the wreath, the posies masked the smell, the tisha was the gasp of the victim and the all fall down was the Black Death. It was weird enough that we colonial kids chanted it in merry ignorance 600 years after the event; weirder still that Zulu kids chant it now while Africa’s parallel plague

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lays waste their parents.

I'm defending the hills, noting that the length and breadth of the planet few people open their curtains onto so expansive a sight as this. Why, in New York even the super-opulent have twenty stories of concrete wall outside their front window. They'd exult at a view Cato Manor takes for granted. Also at the air - clean, crisp, rich; makes lungs feel young.

Scepticism prevails. One Themba says laconically, "they can come with offers."

This is going askew. I'm not predicting a mass immigration of New York's bankers to Cato Manor. I'm not seeking comparative analysis. I'm making the case that *something* here is worth having, *something* here is special. Vista is the most definable facet of the *something*. There it is, hills, hills, stretching forever, city hills and rural hills and squatter hills in combination, green even in midwinter.

But it's more than vista. It's the sound in the streets, where on this holiday morning women carrying loads on heads are laughing across mighty distances in directions they cannot twist to see. It's the throng of self-appointed advisers who have spontaneously adopted an improbable stranger, offering warmth and welcome. It's the space, the fencelessness, the interactions among passers-by. It's the children, who finally tire of the posies and the whoomp, and shift to a new ditty about love and hugs. This song too has an action punchline. On *hug* they hug their neighbour uproariously, and start again.

I'm arguing that these features, intangible and unbankable as may be, are not negligible. This is an intricate proposition from the start, and here bedevilled by language. I have a 2% capacity to decipher the machine-gun blur that is spoken Zulu. (If only people would say words one by one, like a book.) Themba has a 30% brand of English. Most of the others, much less.

I know what I'm getting at: the world isn't just winners and losers, life is more than an economic equation; Cato Manor also has blessings to count. But I hear it ringing hollow.

Am I about to swap? Will I relocate my own personal carcass to live life here, rev-

elling in oxygen and undulation? Not a chance. I see how a sharp cookie like Themba could develop a curl in his lip. “Bloody abelungu<sup>1</sup>”, he’s entitled to think, “we have no jobs and no money and they want to tell us ‘never mind that, get rapturous about air and hills.’”

I turn to safer territory. “Take this industrial park”, I say, gesturing to a humble collection of containers perched above us, “is this one of the things that has been done by the... er...” I hunt for the correct combination of unfamiliar initials “... the CDMA?” The what? I repeat, the CDMA. Puzzled looks. Uh oh, I think. This Cato Manor Development Organisation is the biggest effort ever made to pick a township up and get it moving. It has taken ten years and spent a quarter billion rands of the European Union’s aid money. And nobody has heard of it.

People are staring at me, wrinkling brows, trying to work out what a seedy yem-may is. I flesh it out in full. Cato. Manor. Development. Association. I realise I have transposed. I am simultaneously corrected by a united shout: “CMDA!”

The children launch into a new refrain, CMDA, CMDA, in a high-low sing-song like a patrol car’s siren. The united shout suggests a prima facie answer to one question. The world is thick with NGOs that are famous among donors but unknown in the catchment area. Is this one among them, or has it made its mark upon the minds of the citizenry? Over the next three days I am amply persuaded. Never mind made a mark, CMDA has tattooed itself. Its name is as well known in Cato Manor as any name short of Kaizer Chiefs<sup>2</sup> That is in two ways a pleasure to report.

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<sup>1</sup> *White people. This is the word you’d use in church or court. Writing it, it struck me that Themba would use a different word for muttering under his breath. But what word? It was a surprise to discover that the few hundred Zulu words I know include a total of 0 rude names for whites, and only one merely neutral word, abamhlophe, which means nothing more offensive than “white”. I enquired around, but could dig up nothing more. There must be a PhD waiting, in why not. After all, most languages have more slang for rival humans than they do for reproductive organs.*

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<sup>2</sup> *One of the Big Two football teams.*

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First, it is nice to know that all that input has not gone unnoticed. In Cato Manor the propensity of mankind to sleep through revolution is surely as great as anywhere, especially the kind of revolution that comes minus blood or dynamite. That there is mass recognition of endeavour on the go, endeavour identified by name, is heartening. Second, it is a relief to have one solid, unequivocal and upbeat finding to report, because from here on none of those epithets are in large supply.

With the initialising unravelled, my informants address the question: are these industrial containers the work of CMDA? “Yes, of course”, say or imply many voices, but one person dissents. Debate breaks out and rapidly becomes too ferocious for anyone to spare time for translation. The dissident is maintaining that CMDA doesn’t do everything; other institutions also have a hand. *Which* institution/s is not clear. What is clear is that the borderlines of development activity are dim to the point of invisibility.

“Metro”, “Council” and “Corporation” pour forth in a mingled torrent. Names like Cosatu and various Saint Somebodies come up in lower frequency. The whole debate is underlain by a recurring word - “igovernment”<sup>3</sup>.

The dissident gains headway, winning murmurs of assent. I wait for resolution and for someone to draw breath and provide enlightenment. Suddenly the debate is over and everybody seems to have an urgent appointment elsewhere. From the

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<sup>3</sup> *The Durban municipal authority was “Corporation” for a century or more, the only South African city to follow Victorian English fashion quite that far. In the late 1990s all the cities become Metros, which was supposed to sound up-to-the minute and non-colonial. Unfortunately the Metros in general were severely “capacity challenged”, meaning that they tossed the old-style (white) officials out somewhat before the new-style (black) crowd were fully primed, so Metro rapidly became a kind of byword for ineptitude. The image seems to be fading now, touch wood, as the changing of the guard wears in. The Saints are the zillion churches and church extensions of Durban, mainly Anglican or what the Americans call Episcopal, who won the 19th-century conversion wars around these parts. The initial letter “i” is a major feature of Zulu linguistics, prefixing virtually every noun except a human being, who is a “u”. The Zulu word for an imported notion, including almost anything to do with politics and economics and technology, is usually “i” plus the English or Afrikaans.*

few who remain, a new spokesman emerges, David, who has played little part in the argument and now makes up for lost time.

David is one of nature's gentlemen. He is unstinting in his eagerness to explain, and the eagerness is still unstinted half an hour later when his explanatory torrent slows to a flood. The nub is that all development is by government, but government has different branches. The elite branch is Development Association, which government sends in when other branches fall down on the job. This happened here but most unfortunately the other branches did not listen properly, so now there is confusion.

To demonstrate the confusion David takes me to the industrial park. It's a short walk and it passes his house, which he points out. The washing is hanging on the line, a full load of colourful clothing, mainly children's. I could reach out and touch it. For that matter I could reach out and in a flash lighten the washing line's load.

Nobody, clearly, does this thing. If they did, the washing would not be flapping in the roadside breeze. I feel a pang of pained comparison. Where I live, washing dries behind spiky railings and electric fences. Here is Spiderman on a blue Size 5 T-shirt, practically brushing my shoulder. How innocent a sight is this; how poignant a reminder of lost freedom. For me, peculiarly poignant. Only yesterday we installed a tougher, sharper extra security system, a thing I look upon with no joy. I have a lump in my throat as I say to David: "Your crime can't be too bad."

David replies with asperity. "Crime? Crime? There is no crime here, completely none."

Hm, I thought *I* was sounding like Pollyanna. It's rare enough to hear of *less* crime. *No* crime is stretching credulity. But David is adamant. Clearly this is what he sees. Can I parachute in full of bourgeois paranoia and deny it? I open my mouth to congratulate his community on this interesting achievement, but he cuts in and changes the picture totally.

"We have nothing, this side" he says, "so the criminals don't waste their time. They go to town."

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What a juxtaposition of sentiments. Was that a flash of pride, instantly squashed by victimhood? And what dedicated victimhood. There is not “nothing” here. Here’s his own washing line, laden with stealables. Through his unattended open door a stocked sideboard is visible. Yet he claims an improbable triumph and then subverts it into an exaggerated failure. There’s pathology here.

We reach the container park. Five or six shipping containers, fitted with windows and doors, are there for use as offices or factories. That only one is today being used is no great surprise. This is the Youth Day holiday, June 16. The user is the tailor, Ngcobo.

Ngcobo is hospitable and very willing to introduce the uninitiated into the life & times of Cato Manor. His tape measure hangs over his neck, his glasses perch on his nose. Several completed school pinafores hang on a rack behind him. It’s a picturebook scene.

“Are you happy with your work?”

“No, my container leaks”.

It’s a winter morning and the container is an oven. Its state on a summer afternoon does not bear contemplation. It is depressing that Ngcobo sees discomfort before anything else, but it is telling that he does not see today’s discomfort. The currently non-leaking leak must be a real disturbance.

But, a leak...? Of all potential obstructions, from market problems to supplies problems to productivity problems, how can a leak come so fast to mind from so broad a question?

“Um, did you think of perhaps fixing the leak?”

“I repaired, but I failed.” Ngcobo demonstrates where he repaired and he failed. I see there is not a leak but many leaks; a case for professionals.

“Is there maybe someone here in Cato Manor who repairs metal leaks?”

“No.”

“Is there anyone you could find who might come to repair these leaks?”

“Yes, in town, but CMDA must pay.”

“If these leaks are wrecking your business, maybe it’s worth your while to get them fixed.”

“No, no. This is not my container. After I am gone the next person will not pay me for what I have spent.”

“Are you thinking of leaving?”

“I think I will be here many years.”

Minds fail to meet over Ngcobo’s leak problem. We turn to easier terrain. Ngcobo’s ambition is to reduce crime in Cato Manor. “Crime is too much, too much. Most unfortunately I suffer at the present time from lack of funds, but if I can get at least fifteen thousand rand<sup>4</sup> I can take on many people to sew. We can supply the whole of Cato Manor with school uniforms. We can all have work, and crime will go down.”

Which surely constitutes a magnificent aim, if not necessarily a business plan. There are just some temporary obstacles, leak aside. One is electricity. Ngcobo has electricity but it is “not formal”. This gives Ngcobo much anxiety. I ask if he means stolen electricity.

Ngcobo says: “No! No! Not *stolen!* No!”

Well then if not *stolen* could it possibly be ... shall we say *illegal* electricity?

Ngcobo sighs, long and pensive. “Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah. Uh. Slightly.”

He goes into a detailed account of the drawbacks of slightly illegal electricity. The first is that you can’t use it all the time. “Today, maybe you can go by electric. But tomorrow maybe you must go by hand.” What makes a today and what a tomor-

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<sup>4</sup> In June 2002 the rand was at around 7 to the US dollar. Six months later it hit a terrific slide, losing half its value. After another year it was back at 7 and everyone who imported or exported was ready for straitjackets. Businesses active in tropical Africa needed industrial strength straitjackets. While in the right hand the rand played yo-yo against the dollar, in the left hand the Mozambique metical, Angolan kwanza, Ghanaian cedi, Zambian kwacha and many more played pin the tail on the rand. The kwanza fell to some five million to the dollar before a bold revaluation (seems to have) worked. The cedi dropped over 40 years from \$1.30 to \$0.000015, but there it stabilised and trade now takes place.

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row, I do not make out. I do know that even on electric days, informal electricity is troublesome. “You cannot put the cost in your books like for formal electric. Also you know that as time goes the police will come for you.”

The greatest problem, however, is Gem. Gem, here in Durban, produces school uniforms on a massive scale. Ngcobo reckons he can compete with Gem - or could if he had R15 000 and formal electric. Already, he claims, he underprices Gem, because “they are used to a lot of money, I am used to small money. I can benefit by two rand per garment, and it is alright. You must not want to be rich. To want to be rich is the cause of crime. You must want to give work. To give work reduces crime.”

I love Ngcobo’s ambition and philosophy but have difficulty with his arithmetic. Ngcobo explains patiently how he sells school shirts at R30 a time, complete with shoulder piping, of which he is greatly proud. This means R8 profit. He can make “maybe six” shirts between dawn and supper. He goes through the calculations several times - material R10 a metre, shirt requires 1,5 metres... Although he never gets the same answer twice he is adamant that his profit is fixed, R8 a shirt.

Mysteries strike the mind, like how a person stays alive earning R8 for two hours of skilled work. Greater; how he stays not just alive, but civilly alive, pleasantly alive. Even greater; how one person can simultaneously say “I will conquer the world” and “I can do nothing about this leaking window that cripples me.”

I am keen to explore these matters further but our private seminar terminates at this point. With a rattling and a clanking and the bellow of a far-gone exhaust, a car pulls up at the container. It stops diagonally, so close that car and container exchange rust flakes. A delegation emerges, led by one David, hereinafter David II as distinct from Washing-Line David.

A sharp exchange between Ngcobo and David II ends with Ngcobo staring at the floor, crestfallen, and David turning to me to proclaim that he is now in charge of me. Having delivered this unanticipated message - where but Africa can a total stranger walk up and amiably declare “I am in charge of you”? - David II becomes

tongue-tied. He broaches a new sentence three or four times, but each time it splutters away. He gestures that I should walk a few steps with him, to privacy. I do this thing, and after a few more false starts David makes his point, which is that this is a very difficult situation.

My mysterious failure to possess a vee-hike-el has caused dismay. David would by all means like to take me to all places in Cato Manor. He has for this purpose procured a vee-hike-el but - his voice lowers and his tone drops an octave - most unfortunately the petrol is short. If perhaps I could pop something out, this problem would surely be overcome.

Surreptitiously, in keeping with the conspiratorial tone of proceedings, I pop out fifty rands. The conspiratorial tone vanishes. David II emits a yell of triumph and gleefully brandishes the note to the delegation, holding it up with both hands. Then he turns back to me, resumes his graveside expression, and with the formality of a footman ushers me towards the car's left rear door.

The seat he offers looks like a wodge of congealed horsehair. It seems a humble slot to relegate the popper-out of petrol money. But scrutiny reveals that the front left seat is a backrest minus a base, and on the far side of the rear seat a jagged spring pokes from the horsehair in an anatomically perilous position. I am being shown to the royal box, as it were.

By now we have an audience, ten or fifteen silent people expecting something to happen. It doesn't feel right to just clamber in and be driven away. I run a Find programme through the smatterings of Zulu stored in accessible files of the cranium, and produce a pidgin commentary. Hayi, iskorokoro. Iphi imoto isha? Ufuna mina ngihlala lesitulo? Gibberish, virtually, with wrong grammar and mangled words. But the audience gets the gist, which is that the car does not inspire confidence, and they crack up.

David drops his lugubrious demeanour in favour of a boisterous reply that redoubles the hilarity. I gather he is defending his vee-hike-el's honour. Then he takes the driver's seat, I the royal box, and his co-delegates jump in besides. One

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guy gingerly manoeuvres round the exposed spring, two others squash onto the left front floor. Where we are going, I have no idea. But the mystery tour is at the departure gate.

Except, David II doesn't have ignition keys. In fact there doesn't seem to be ignition, or at any rate not the customary lock on the dashboard. In fact there doesn't seem to be a dashboard. David's door is open. He is addressing a person standing next to it - I see only a khaki-shirted trunk and an obstinate body-language. David jabs his finger hard and often towards a position next to his right knee, underneath what would be the dashboard if dashboard there was. David is becoming alarmingly short of patience.

The argument stops abruptly. David stares straight ahead for a long moment. I see his eyes with unusual clarity in the driver's mirror. I take fright. I've heard of "murderous expressions". This is the first time I see one, literal and unmistakable. A fight seems imminent, a sport for which I am no customer even when the tickets are complimentary.

I am about to forfeit my pink banknote and depart ngezinyawo when khaki-shirt speaks. David breaks his furious trance and turns to me: "They want five rand for starting."

It feels as sneaky as departure tax at third-world airports, but if five rand will forestall the breaking of heads so be it. A coin changes hands twice; me to David to the khaki shirt. Khaki-shirt crouches at David's knee and twiddles wires. Dangling lights light up.

The crowd push the car until it points down the hill. Then they run with us, waving and cheering while David jerks the clutch. On the severalth attempt the engine kicks. The crowd roars hearty approval, the exhaust roars an unmuffled reply, and we're off. The waving and shouting keeps on. This feels like a Cato Manor version of the New York tickertape parade. The Big Apple might do it on a greater scale (although what do they use nowadays for tickertape?) but not with a greater will.

Stocktake: in the hands of four total strangers in a roadworthy inspector's nightmare that surely features in the vehicle theft squad's records, being driven to who knows where by a dodgem cowboy with a murderous streak. Wholly contented. Ah, Africa!

I wave reciprocations through the back window until the crowd falls from sight, and then meet the eye of my co-occupant of the horsehair. A glance indicates that here is a 10% English quotient, tops. I must greet, in civility, but my Zulu is all run out, so I say "Quite some send-off." I know as I say it that this is a hard-to-starboard comment.

Hard-to-starboard is a family metaphor deriving from a long-ago time that my dad told a young gardener pushing a barrow "hard to starboard, old man," and wondered why the fellow failed to turn sharp right. A hard-to-starboard is a recognition more than a meaningful communication; you don't expect a meaningful reply. But the day is full of surprises. My neighbour responds in university English: "yes, they appreciated your attempt at Zulu." It transpires that despite deep disguise this is a person with half a degree, and in Political Science at that.

The half-degree notwithstanding, I don't swallow his interpretation. A smattering of bad Zulu in an umlungu mouth is no big deal. In Soweto, maybe, where people gasp and all but award you the Nobel Prize for managing sack-oo-boner<sup>5</sup>, but this is KZN. We Jo'burgers know this much about KZN: the Banana Boys speak Zulu<sup>6</sup>. They love sneaking resounding Zulu clicks into conversation, and they take pride in their favourite stock phrase "I spoke Zulu before I spoke English."

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<sup>5</sup> "Hullo", spelt *sakubona* and pronounced, by *Zulus*, something like *sou'born*.

<sup>6</sup> KZN, KwaZulu Natal, the sensitive reconciliatory etc 1994 compromise between the Zulu name and the English one. Now there is (as with other sensitive and reconciliatory 1994 products such as the merged national anthem) a degree of vocal wish to drop the white bits. White male Natalians are traditionally blond, tanned, outrageously muscly — until they overdose on beer and steak — and born on surfboards. For decades they have relished the banana image, of sun and plenty, with such success that the banana is now a semi-official symbol of the entire province.

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I remind my neighbour of this fact. He cackles as caustically as only a Pol Sci student can. “That’s their act, for your benefit. They don’t impress us - ‘tata lo box, faka lo firewood’”. That’s one of the things wrong with CMDA. There are people who have worked here for years and can hardly greet in Zulu.” He runs through a list of offending names - Mr This, Mrs That. It is a long list. Are these all CMDA people? “Yes,” he affirms, “all CMDA people.”

Does CMDA have a payroll the size of the railways? Well, no. My half-degreed friend seems to be corroborating the evidence that people get mixed up about which institution is what. How obliging; verification. How unfair; CMDA takes the rap for any offence caused by any random outsider.

But hold on, Half-degree is not backing down. He’s aware that CMDA doesn’t employ everyone he is fingering. But he does not recognise the employment contract as the criterion.

I’m coming at it in left-brain linearism, the dreaded “white man’s thinking”: of course an organisation is responsible for people it employs, of course it is not responsible for people it doesn’t employ. He’s coming at it from somewhere different: CMDA is the pace-setter, the body that determines tone and approach. What does it matter who is on their payroll and who not?

In a seminar room I would probably say, or at any rate think: “nonsense.” On the horsehair a broader mind applies. Leadership does mean setting tones. Some companies set a suit-and-tie tone, some open-neck. Some set a by-the-book tone, some a cut-corners. In some companies respect for the meek and lowly is real, in others there is tacit licence to treat it as a charade. Yes, a company can be expected to set a language tone too, rather than lamely pleading “oh but those other people are merely contractors, we aren’t responsible for their attitudes.”

We linearites with cold-climate roots have our uses - our bridges mainly stand up and our engines frequently start. Some upcoming day the fashion will pass on

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<sup>7</sup> *He’s ascribing to them a severely low level of pidgin Zulu.*

and we'll cease apologising for our existence. But damn, we're also good at standing on high horses and calling them principles.

Anyway... if monolingualism is one of the wrong things, what are the others?

Half-degree draws breath in a manner implying "I hope you have a lot of time".

I mentally sharpen my Fearless Objective Journalist's Pen.

He says: "to start with..."

I say: "yes?"

He says: "To start with, they listen to all these foreign people, when we're the ones who live here."

"Uh huh. And...?"

He says: "And they get things wrong. Look at Cato Crest."

I'd happily look at Cato Crest. Is that perhaps where we are now going? No, we are going to Chesterville, "the pride of Cato Manor", and we arrive before he can take his fault-list further. I detect that Half-degree is scratching a bit, but I took him unawares. I look forward to what other gripes he musters when we resume. "Here we are", I am meantime told, "Chesterville." Another of the thousand hills. Another magnificent clear breathtaking view forever, this time westwards. This time, too, a much more spacious and orderly style of house - very middle-class, several rooms and garden fences. In the distance, a couple of kilometres away and a thousand feet below us, a large township. I ask "What's that place?"

"Chesterville."

"Oh. I thought you just said this is Chesterville?"

"Yes this is Chesterville also."

"Let me be clear. If I'm coming here from town, must I get a taxi going to Chesterville?"

"No, you get the taxi for Wiggins Fast Track West."

"I see, that's how to get to Chesterville?"

"Yes, CMDA says this side is Wiggins, but for us this side is Chesterville same as that side, because this is where the invasions were."

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The logic defeats me. Elucidation establishes that in 1993 people from that-side Chesterville came to this-side Chesterville and moved in.

Aha, this was the famous Chesterville housing uprising. Much has been written on that, mainly in tones celebrating a non-racialist victory against apartheid. Homeless people took offence at government-built houses standing empty, earmarked for Indians only, and annexed them in the cause of fairness and equality.

Now here we are surveying the scene, and a crowd, of course, is gathering. One of the joiners is a middle-aged man with phuza<sup>8</sup> eyes and breath to power a blow-torch, who announces that he was an Invader. He re-enacts the event in the spirit of a war hero explaining why he ought to have won the Victoria Cross. He evidently sees the Invasion of Chesterville as a victory in the same order as the Battle of Isandhlwana<sup>9</sup>. A couple of people are critical of this account (and later I hear it forcibly stated that the affair was wholly conducted by women) but Phuza-face has the floor. He rises to the occasion, overwell. With each re-enactment, his heroism quotient visibly increases. He would not make a Battlefields Tour-guide, being, I'm told, nearly as incomprehensible in Zulu as he is in English, but most of his audience is spellbound. He is swelling their hearts in the way that Scottish hearts supposedly swell at Bannockburn or Boer ones at Majuba<sup>10</sup>.

However accurate or otherwise his facts, his reception contains learnings of its own. The placid prior impression - "Ah! An empty house! Let's put it to use!" - loses its monopoly. Visions of a Zulu Kristallnacht enter the picture.

The righteous anti-apartheidism loses more than its monopoly. As Phuza por-

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<sup>8</sup> *Dulled by liquor*

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<sup>9</sup> *Zulus with hand weapons wiped out a British regiment.*

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<sup>10</sup> *More beating up on the Brits. From the time the British took a fancy to Africa in 1806 they tended to do a lot more pushing around than being pushed. The established denizens, including white Afrikaans Boers, did not get that much opportunity to kick Brit butt. When they did, they weren't about to forget it in a hurry.*

trays it this was far from the Non Racial We Shall Overcome Holy War defeating the forces of ethnic darkness. This was Zulus donnering Indians. And that, I realise, is why this is “the pride of Cato Manor”. That is why David II & Co have brought me here. That is why Phuza is getting a rapt hearing.

Hearing? More of a commotion, really. It’s taking place at the fence of a house on the top of the hill, front line of the invasion. A young woman emerges, in a dressing gown. Phindi is a night nurse. She has been sleeping, and conveys that she would appreciate the opportunity to pursue this pastime undisturbed. Apprised of the nature of discussion, though, she abandons her plans and joins in with vigour. She is no friend of Phuza’s, and disputes all of his interpretations except one, the ethnic essence. That one she supports wholeheartedly.

“Yes,” she says, “we came from Chesterville.” She points to the that-side Chesterville. “We were supposed to come here to work for the Indians, but we came and took their houses. That man is lying. There was no beating up of the Indians. They ran away and we took the houses. We got the houses free. Now they are worth R35 000. We did good. We made ourselves equal with the Indians instead of servants of the Indians. It is like Ngema<sup>1</sup> says, we need to stand together against the Indians. That is what we did, here. Ngema must make another song, to say we were leaders.”

Mbongeni Ngema’s anti-Indian song is the talking point of the day. The newspaper poster on a lamp-post right next to us says, in *Zulu: Mandela reprimands Ngema over Indians*. Phindi, heating up, says: “Mandela must stay out of it. What does he know? He has never been a slave of the Indians. Ngema is right.” The crowd, as the throng has become, loudly supports her sentiments.

I ask tentatively: “are there Indians living in Cato Manor now?” Phindi, with the crowd as assenting chorus, says “yes, yes, many.”

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<sup>1</sup> A composer and playwright, at the time much in the news for writing a very Non-Politically-Correct, not to say primitive, song about putting Indians in their place.

## WHITE MAN WALKING

“And, uh, do people get on all right?”

“Yes, yes, fine, no trouble.”

I gesture at the houses around. “For example, which of these are Indian people’s houses?”

“No, no, no, there are no Indians here”, respond Phindi & chorus: “*that’s* the Indian side.” They point north. “This side is our side, the Indians are in Bonella.”

A precise echo of Mayfair, the Johannesburg suburb that dealt the death-blow to the Group Areas Act. For five minutes Mayfair was the post-apartheid script come to life, traffic jammed with German and American etcetera TV crews flocking to extol the harbinger of the new non-racial nation soon to be born. Now it’s as intact an Indian group area as anything Verwoerd<sup>12</sup> could have dreamed of. Here, it’s just one step further. What was once Indian, was praised for becoming non-racial, is a Zulu group area.

The Invasion conversation dies with mystifying suddenness and the crowd evaporates, again as if someone had rung a gong that everyone but me could hear. Phindi invites me for tea. I’m tempted to hear more of her but half her mind hopes I’ll decline so she can go back to bed, and that is the half I opt to oblige. Whereupon, after the obligatory oh-but-you-musts, just like a Sandton<sup>13</sup> society hostess, she says: “what will you do now?”

I say casually “oh, I’ll go back”.

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<sup>12</sup> We think he’s world-famous as the architect of Apartheid, the policy South Africa followed for 40 years of everyone in his own ethnic sunbeam. But maybe you don’t think he’s as famous as we think you think, so that’s who he is.

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<sup>13</sup> New(ish) headquarters of crystal glass and 4x4s and similar trappings. From about 1980 blacks started flocking en masse to downtown Johannesburg, previously the territory of whites who responded by decamping ten miles north and turning Sandton into a new Central Business District. It seemed we were en route to a wholesale split, Sydney in the north and Lagos in the south, but lo! Partly thanks to the gold industry refusing to defect, history plays another joker. In the early 2000s there are definite glimmerings of Johannesburg turning into a third-world city so first-world that even the pale crowd venture back.

She says: “Back where?”

“Umm, now that you mention, I don’t exactly know. But the guys who brought me will.”

“What guys?”

I turn around to point out David II and team. No David, no team, no rusting unmuffled horse-haired skorokoro. I never see Half-degree again, and I didn’t even learn his name.

### 3. HATH NOT A PASSED PARCEL FEELINGS?

**F**ROM THE OUTSET, I WAS A SOCIAL LIABILITY. NOT JUST AN UMLUNGU minus imoto<sup>14</sup>, a status which the public mind slots between hobo and madman, but a *prying* umlungu minus imoto. There’s no more dubious brand of mad hobo. Even worse, a prying umlungu minus imoto on a public holiday. That was severely out of order.

My thinking was defensible in theory. Minus imoto I would fit better among the people; taxis criss-cross townships all the time. And a holiday would relieve the worst effect of visiting townships on workdays: with workers at work you meet only the workless, and come away with a depressing sense of wholesale desperation. The practice was another thing. In KZN they think a white man hailing a combi taxi is an optical illusion. And when the employed are present and everyone is *still* desperate, you are denied the solace of telling yourself that you’re seeing a skewed sample.

Plus I seem to have committed an act of Johannesburg cultural imperialism. In my world a public holiday is a by-the-way thing. All else being equal you take time

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<sup>14</sup> *I think you’ve got all this stuff, but editors insist on us spoon-feeding readers abroad (who hardly return the favour, American books don’t believe there are readers abroad). Imoto is a car, from i-moto-car.*

## WHITE MAN WALKING

off. All else not being equal you'll take time off some other day. I imagine CMDA - private professional outfit, dedicated to the onward march of mankind and all that - having a similar loose approach towards the tyranny of clocks and calendars. I may have misconstrued.

My scheduled informant, Mazwi, meets me at CMDA's rather striking HQ and tells me: "I can spare you a couple of minutes", which as a seasoned South African I automatically interpret as "I'll be with you for several hours". In relaxed anticipation I take in the sights as we cross the road to Cato Manor and Mazwi begins introducing its life and times.

After 30 seconds Mazwi breaks off to settle a squabble between his kids in the back. Fine, I take pen from pocket, ready my notebook, and record my first lesson:

*Mazwi - "long & short is tt CMDA dev is here, it's happening, it's changing people's lives. If it hasn't pleased everybody tt's because it's not always fast. In C Crest people are still in shacks after 8 years. In tt position, hard to see big pic."*

I'm going to enjoy this. Mazwi has scarcely started and already questions bubble up. Why so defensive a note so early? Who are the displeased everybodies? What is Cato Crest and why the slowness? Peace settles in the rear but before Mazwi can continue he is distracted by a turn-off. We are amid western-style formal houses with porches, fences, plumbing. We pull up at one.

The householder is standing on her porch eating cereal. She gives Mazwi a small hello. She gives me a look. Mazwi takes my bag from his boot and deposits it on the porch. This action fails to give the householder joy. Her words rush by me like the Tugela<sup>15</sup> in flood, but tone and gesture indicate that her prospectus for the day does not include the care and maintenance of the bag or its owner. Mazwi replies to her over his shoulder, and is gone in a dust cloud. I marvel at such Teutonic

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<sup>15</sup> *The Amazon, relatively, of south-east Africa, a place of short rivers which are navigable by canoe and occasionally by rowing boat. For a thousand days in a row the Tugela is a gentle meander, barely big enough to delay a Landrover. The thousand-and-first, it can toss ten-ton-trucks around like corks.*

adherence to the concepts “couple” and “minutes”.

The householder’s torrent tails off. She says in English: “it’s very difficult, you know. This is family time.” She ushers me inside, seats me at the kitchen table, and vanishes.

The décor makes a statement. Ornaments and decorations are in the yellow, green and black of the ANC. No less than three ANC membership cards adorn a mantelpiece. Once upon a time in this sort of house, especially in this sort of province, anything that might be mistaken for those colours was hidden as hard as a lover’s letter<sup>16</sup>. That the colours are now so unhidden suggests admirable progress. Freedom displaces oppression, how reassuring.

But second thoughts intrude. If the guy next door wants to festoon his kitchen in the five colours of Inkatha, is he as free to do that too? Or could this tricolored kitchen say more about the jackboot changing to a different foot than about maturity settling in?

Furthermore, not to be churlish, is the blazoning of party colours a helpful freedom anyway? Isn’t real freedom where people don’t bother? All those violent years, Natal’s curse was its fixation with political identity. Where in the world is a place obsessed with Parties a place that achieves what it wants? Progress comes with a culture that unwraps political identity for voting day, storing it in a back drawer the rest of the time. Still, perhaps boisterous exhibitionism is a phase on the journey.

Having left me ample solitary time to reflect (wholly free of any evidence of family), the householder returns. She brings someone with her. The someone says he

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<sup>16</sup> *Over the last phase of white rule, Zulu nationalists in the name Inkatha were in local power. The ANC, exiled and hobnobbing with communist governments and other fearsome things, was unwelcome. Young men could get killed for wearing socks that looked like ANC colours. The ANC became government in 1994, following what may be the noblest abdication any minority regime ever undertook. Now the ANC and Inkatha are allies, not very lovingly but it’s enough of a miracle that very few heads are being broken.*

## WHITE MAN WALKING

is Mxolisi and he will look after me. He adds, "I worked on Saturday and now Monday it is holiday and I must work again." I acquire an insight into the emotions of the Parcel in the game Pass the Parcel, where the winner is the one who gets rid of it fastest.

Mxolisi hoists my bag and walks toward a car. I follow. He says: "but you must buy Ethel cold-drinks". My serotonin slams into revolt mode, having not been offered as much as a glass of water. I turn to the householder - Ethel, I now know - and am about to comment accordingly when she says "so what are you doing here, by the way?"

This is our first verbal communication since the "very difficult". It re-draws the dynamics. In no time Ethel Herembi and I are buddies, and I'm full of respect. We're back in the kitchen, which a few moments ago was a fortress of solitude and becomes with her return a traffic roundabout. Every minute somebody pitches up for a TB pill. The pills are two feet out of Ethel's reach from her place at the table. She has a continuous movement like a gym exercise. Stand up, take step, produce pill, take step, sit down, stand up, take step... She's talking all the while in English and somehow manages constant Zulu cross-examinations without interrupting the flow.

Ethel works with Aids people - "those who have been betrayed by their families and need words of support and love, and mealie meal when we have got, or when we can take from other homes. We know how to share, here." She runs a domestic violence support programme, paved by the CMDA and Natal University. She has been a community leader forever - "I am that sort of person". Her leadership capacity has recently risen massively because "CMDA has multi-skilled us, we can do things we never knew before".

For instance? "For instance now I know that I cannot just tell, I must explain. I cannot say 'don't put this ashtray here,'" - she grabs an ashtray and pushes it under her sleeve - "I must say 'if you put the ashtray there it will make your clothes dirty'."

Ethel lived in a shack when she came from the Eastern Cape ("No, of course

Herembi is not a Zulu name, it is Afrikaans, from hemp, a shirt.”) She used to be “that kind of person that complains about CMDA, that they go slowly, but now I know it is the community that makes things slow. They put up shacks where there is supposed to be roads. They put up shacks where there is supposed to be pipes. And the most people came running from KwaZulu, running from Msinga, running from the violence. When they came here they thought they will soon run again. They must learn they can stay here, they must do things properly to make Cato Manor good. They do not learn that in one day. They must learn to not steal electricity. Seven children died already, stealing electricity. Leaders must talk to them, many times. In Cato Crest there were problems, the leaders did not provide information but now CMDA has made a big committee, working together. It takes time.”

Mxolisi is fidgeting and pacing, transmitting the sentiment “okay, time up.” Ethel ignores him. She has the bit between her teeth now. She decides I must learn how “real Zululand” is returning to Cato Manor. Brushing off Mxolisi’s objections, she walks me to see a real Zulu house. On the way her thesis is that Cato Manor’s lift-off must include a revival of Zulu culture. “Children must not do like this”, she shakes her body like Britney Spears. “They must do this” - mimicking a Zulu shield-dance.

My worries about freedom and political identity are shaken, by the humility of ignorance. A decade ago not a lot of Natal people, let alone Eastern Cape imports, would simultaneously both harbour an ANC ideology and stand up for Zulu traditionalism. So progress does happen.

But what of that hypothetical Inkatha fan who might want to fly his colours too? I ask. Ethel says: “No, this is ANC stronghold, there are no Inkatha people.” None? That would be surprising. “Maybe some few, but they are quiet.” QED.

The real Zulu house is very Zulu - big thatch umuzi with small thatch outhouses; grassless gravel swept to gravel’s equivalent of spotlessness. Ethel ducks to enter the big room and immediately calls me to follow. A fortyish man is watching the Comrades Marathon on TV, oblivious to interruption. A fortyish woman is sitting

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on the bed in panties. She has been braiding her hair and is distinctly less oblivious to interruption than her culture - which does not recognise “private parts” above the waist - officially requires.

I develop an acute concern over which unpronounceable Russian is winning Comrades, and am introduced to Nomzamo with my back to her while I watch the screen. Dumisane continues to comport himself as if the materialising of a stranger in his bedroom before his naked wife is a phenomenon too mundane to blink at.

As Ethel says, though, things take time. In due course, with Nomzamo garbed and doeked and the Russians running on without Dumisane’s support, we conduct a site inspection in the sun while the obligatory crowd gathers. The inspection is at Dumisane’s behest. He wishes to demonstrate the true meaning of social and ecological responsibility. His real Zulu house has perfectly adequate foundations that cause no ill whatsoever, while the neighbour with “that big house there, big, big, big like whites” has in the course of erecting his unlovable edifice damaged (“boggeredop”) the neighbourhood sewerage.

Dumisane might have the warm-up rate of a diesel tanker but once in top gear he’s a Formula One. He explains the world at a pace to bruise the ear, mainly in Zulu but with snatches of English which pass by so fast that I seldom detect them until they’re gone. The most decipherable phrase is “CMDA”, repeated a few thousand times. Ethel translates - in telegraph form, mercifully, or we’d still be there.

Dumisane’s theme is that while the sun may not literally shine out of CMDA’s offices at Central Node, that is just a technicality. Every good thing in Cato Manor is there because CMDA brought it there. Now unfortunately CMDA is closing. Dumisane draws stark distinctions between the roles of different authorities, and has zero confidence in any of them doing anything once CMDA is no longer there as lynchpin. In particular he wants one more thing from CMDA before it goes. They have provided houses and roads and halls and clubs and everything. Now they must just please do jobs.

I suggest that Dumisane has already done himself a potential job. Some tourists will want to stay in Bed-and-Breakfasts like this house. They can see the rectangular ones in Munich or Albuquerque or Sandton or anywhere. Give them a real Zulu house, with solid security and a modicum of concessions to their comfort-bases. They'll line up.

Dumisane is thunderstruck and so is Ethel. This is it! Here is the way! They imply that by noon they'll have the board up. Dumisane wants my name and numbers, for marketing support. I tell him, I'm Denis.

A hush descends. What did you say your name was?

I give it again. Denis. A roar of laughter explodes. Cato Manor has a famous Dennis (I presume in the majority 2-n variety). This Dennis was a goat. It/he drank stout and had a party trick. It stamped a front leg once for one quart of stout, twice for two. People explode in laughter; whether at the memory or the human connection I don't know. The hilarity puts an end to development-talk. Anyway Mxolisi has arrived by car and is tugging my sleeve.

Mxolisi and two friends take me off. We're going to Cato Crest, they say. On the way I learn that Ethel is a big shot at CMDA, a board member. My first thought is: Damn, that invalidates the enthusiastic things she's said. My second thought is: Does it?

My brief is to hear the "view from the street". My assumption is that this means outside views, uncompromised by involvement. I begin to wonder if this assumption is invalid white-type thinking. Again I hunger for something better than the lemming horror of being guilty of white-type thinking. Where would telephony be without white-type thinking, I'd like to know, or freeways or literacy or joint stock ventures or electrocardiographs? The trick is to re-evaluate selectively, rather than throw the whole portmanteau overboard. Here's a case for selective re-evaluation:

White man's instinct says that Ethel's upbeat view of CMDA doesn't count if she's tied in to CMDA. She would be upbeat, wouldn't she? But what Ethel said was cogent in its own right. Maybe she's tied in because she's upbeat; not upbeat

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because she's tied in. And she's informed, being tied in. Does her informed view come second, because she's involved, to that legendary master of apathy the man in the street?

Somehow the tour of the Crest, Cato Manor's notorious slum, starts at Bellair, Cato Manor's central business district. We swoop to inches of the supermarket door. Children scatter. A spy leap saves an old man from an amputated foot. Were this my suburban shopping centre, thirty people would be calling for police. Here we get a couple of dirty looks, two seconds long. Immense patience: Africa's best feature, and its ruin.

Mxolisi and entourage tell me that by democratic consultation (uncluttered by my vote) they have decided I must see the good before I see the bad. Thus, the shopping centre, a CMDA initiative; priority given to local tenants, "our own people."

Local tenants? I look at the shop. Big, bright, immaculate, neat shelves stocked to the gills in militarily precise lines. Things certainly are changing ... unless, um ...?

Mxolisi reads my mind. "Of course", he says "we ourselves do not have bigger shops. These are Indian shops, but our own Indians, from Bonella."

Oh well, I had for a moment hoped this was an actual Zulu shop. But after one look I was doubtful. Why? And Mxolisi's comment took for granted that a shop like this couldn't be Zulu-owned. Why? And what a revealing split-level of "us" - our own locals, proudly, but not "we ourselves". And why should it matter at all, in this supposedly non-racial new nation? Perhaps because policy makes it matter, policy and law, saying that Zulus shall be shopkeepers in the same proportions as Indians, farmers in the same proportions as Boers, dentists and accountants in the same proportion as Jews. All argument over whether our national game is soccer or rugby can cease; it is the game of Let's Pretend.

Ayob Khan is the proprietor. "I used to have a run-down shop, a rotten shop. There were only shacks here then; crime was terrible. I was shot three times. When CMDA advertised for local applicants, it changed my life entirely, I can tell you. I so

enjoy it here now, I enjoy it more than my own community. These people have respect. You know for years I used to serve through a cage, but here I give them freedom of movement. Look, they're walking around, choosing. My backers taught me that. They said 'treat them like thieves and they will be thieves.' It wasn't easy changing, I can tell you. But I'm pleased I did. They behave better now, they're more dignified, everything is better except money.

"The people have no money. It's a problem. There's a clothing store, and a pharmacist and a cinema and a funeral parlour and a bottle store and me. But there's no money for anything except absolute essentials, so only the funerals and the bottle store do well. I get more people looking for work than people buying. They want any job, a one-day job, a five-minute job, anything. They ask ten rand a day. That's that they *ask*. They'd *take* anything. Cents. You don't understand. For people here, cents is wealth.

"Me, I'm above water, but just. I can't sell Nesquick. I can't sell Horlicks. I sell none of the lines I can mark up 30%. I sell basics only, basics, basics. That's 10%. It's tight. But new things are coming. Look at these containers that CMDA is doing, they're creating businessmen; people who were pushing barrows before, they begin to think bigger."

The crest of Cato Crest has a newly acquired topknot; a community centre put up by CMDA. From a distance the centre looks romantic; castle on a peak. An untiring sucker for hilltop views, I am keen to see out from the inside. No such thing is available, when we get there. More the flavour of the prison yard. You do not see out, you see bricks.

Hall and library are closed, I note in what must be a critical tone. Mxolisi's friend David (III) says defensively: "Obviously. It's holiday today".

"Which is when people can use halls and libraries."

"But these workers too must have holiday!"

"Give them shifts, days off, overtime, like firemen, but open public places on public holidays."

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“No, no. That’s not right, that’s wrong.” All three shake their heads at this brutal capitalist unfeelingness.

We return to the car and drive through Cato Crest, a mixture of many abject shacks and a few liveable homes, mostly home-built and variegated rather than “formal”. Outside one of these a mama is sitting on a home-made chair. She has bare feet and a colourful hat made from supermarket bags. She startles when we slam to a halt alongside her, but bursts into wild laughter when Mxolisi yells across me, through the passenger window.

He explains: “I said this is her big day, I’m bringing a white man to propose to her.”

MaZondi is “one of the lucky ones”. Her shack was in the way of a road, so CMDA moved her up here to a nice house. At first she did not know the people and was worried, but now there are no problems.

No problems? She mulls and modifies. Two problems.

One: her friends down the hill are still suffering; the ones who weren’t in the way of the road. They are crying: is Development finished now, where is Development gone?

Two: she is still waiting for electricity; they keep saying ‘it’s coming, it’s coming’ but it never comes. In the old days she never expected electricity and was never disappointed by its absence. Now she has expectations and is constantly disappointed.

A dreadlocked youth who has joined the party says in English: “That’s Metro. Metro it does nothing.” He breaks into Zulu, while mimicking a case of exaggerated constipation. Peals of laughter split the air. MaZondi eventually shushes everyone - we are a dozen or more by now. She wants to bring up another thing, crime.

Aha. This thing I know about. The South African mantra.

But MaZondi comes at it from an angle more than somewhat different. She speaks in Zulu amid cheers and interjections. Mxolisi’s translation is under frequent and mainly overlapping challenge by Dreadlocks, David III and several freelancers. It’s Babel. The details as I receive them would not do for courtroom testi-

mony but the gist is crystal:

The best thing here, saIys MaZondi, is that there is no crime. This is because there are no police. When you are under English Law [sic], you must go to the police. The police will tell you they do not have staff, they do not have cars, they do not have time, and they do not have the right paper to write your complaint. Or if they have the right paper, they do not have a pen. Then they will say “Where is your area committee member?” If you have not come with your area committee member they will say “Who are you? You are a chancer. You are wasting our time.” Then they will say: “What are you giving me, to take your case?” Then you give them, and that is the end.

But in Cato Crest there is not English Law. There is Inkantolo Esihlathini.

At least, I think that’s what there is. At this point translation services become heated way past comprehensibility. Mxolisi says “Kangaroo Court”, but Dreadlocks and others object that this is a bad name. It must be “People’s Court” or, says one guy, “True Court.” MaZondi is adamant that whatever Isilungu<sup>17</sup> name this entity is given it must be a good name, because it is a good thing. For example, if somebody taps one time into somebody else’s electricity, he will not tap into anybody else’s electricity ever again.

There is a drastic ring in this, if not sinister, and the interpreters become exercised to the exclusion of even a token English tracking. I infer that discussion is no longer supposed to be for the ears of outsiders. Perhaps especially not outsiders likely to share English Law’s naïve faith in due process or in innocence until guilt is proven or in similar pettifogging notions that demarcate justice from jungle. My further

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<sup>17</sup> “White language”. Quite a derogatory concept, really, implying “some alien tongue, who cares which one”. For a white guy to use “black language” like that would be a bit off. Why is it different for her? I don’t know, but it is. Even odder, she knows some English and probably some Afrikaans; a black person in Durban would have to be retarded not to. Whereas a white guy can be a research physicist or a millionaire industrialist and unable to identify a word in any African language. Strange old world.

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report on Cato Crest views of criminal punishment is confined to: the subject is under debate.

Leaving MaZondi, I say by way of sign-off: “so the problems are speed, right - your friends’ houses and your electricity?” That’s what she’d said, back when interpretation was relatively systematic. I expect her to nod in a manner of “yes, right”, and we’ll go.

MaZondi looks puzzled. She asks for interpretation. She takes a deep breath, draws herself up regally, and shouts, in English. “No! Those are little problems. The big problem is work.” She switches to Zulu and delivers an oratorical tirade in the Ciceronian style, built around repetition.

The repeated phrase is the suffix “-sebenzi”. “-sebenzi”, I know, is the reverse of “-sebenza”, work. She lists every category of humankind which akasebenzis, does not have work. The men have no work, the boys have no work, the mothers have no work, the grandfathers have no work. She refines to ever tighter specifics. The tradesmen have no work, the matriculants have no work, the nurses have no work...

Her thrust is not in doubt but I’m wondering whether rhetorical overstatement comes into play. How do people stay alive? When the tirade ends a calmer phase of amplification begins. The essence is that people stay alive by pensions. Her own late husband’s pension goes towards feeding a long list of dependants. Secondly, *some* people do get work, building CMDA houses.

For the rest it is “selling copper, selling scrap, cutting the grass in the Indians’ houses, and women can collect supermarket bags and knit items”. She herself knits items like the hat she is wearing, for sale at “three rand; or it can be five rand”.

Three rand or five; either is gut-wrenching. MaZondi’s economic analysis is more grippingly dismal than any flip-chart version I know. Copper wire theft is peculiarly depressing anyway - a thief can cripple half a province, not to mention frying himself, in the hope of a ten rand gain. It is extra-depressing when presented as a brand of self-employment.

The very concept of self-employment is even more depressing, and a sickening contrast. The fortunate world moves up and out of the notion “a job” into the notion of work that you create on your own terms. But in this world a uniform and a clock-card and a trade union membership represent the height of ambition. To work for yourself is taken as synonymous with begging, an abandoning of hope.

When we finally pull away from MaZondi I ought to be depressed witless. Somehow, though, that turns out difficult. MaZondi is too gracious, too warm, too generally nice and straight and genuine, to leave depression as the parting note.

I have decided I shall not demean this very human exchange with the dispensing of hand-outs. MaZondi makes that easier by not asking, hinting, or registering recognition of the obvious likelihood that whatever is in my wallet right now would mean weeks of survival for her and her kin. She sees us off in the manner she might see off a twin brother on his way to Antarctica.

Mxolisi guns away. We’ve gone half a block and I think “No.” I make Mxolisi return, which he does by resentfully reversing at 4 000 rpm. MaZondi and a rump entourage are still at the roadside. I tender the first note to hand, a note representing perhaps the price of two pastas with beer and coffee. MaZondi receives it with dignity. We depart again. In the wing mirror I see her dancing. The throng are congratulating her like she just won the Lotto.

Next stop is the Cato Crest Industrial Park, i.e. another slightly forlorn laager of metal containers. All but two of the ten or so containers are closed. Of these two, one is the tuck-shop, whose proprietor tells me that today’s business has so far amounted to four Chappies, unit price 20 cents. The other is Boy-boy Mokoatle’s furniture factory.

Boy-boy Mokoatle passed matric in Matatiele - thence the Sotho surname - and “came this side because there was no work that side.” There wasn’t much work this side either but Boy-boy befriended an itinerant carpenter, who knocked on township doors offering to fix furniture for “half a crown or ten bob”. Boy-boy watched and learned. Then he met Judy McQueen, or Makwini, from CMDA and

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his life changed.

Boy-boy is on the point of explaining how his life changed when Mxolisi's henchmen arrive to say "we are thirsty". This information, redolent with expectation, is addressed to me but Boy-boy cuts it off sharply with "you are still stinking from yesterday". He carries on talking, in a way that self-consciously says "ignore them, you're in my place and owe me your attention". I admire his style. The henchmen slink off.

Boy-boy explains that Judy signed him on to a course where he learned how to run his own business. He produces a SWOTS summary - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. The Strengths column consists of: "Capable". Weaknesses are to do with shortages of material and equipment and "Community has little to pay". Opportunities are "Recently married people. These people always like to see new house with beautiful and quality furnisher of their choice."

Boy-boy also has a written Manifesto: "I would like to see myself being one of the people who worked so hard in fighting poverty in this country by employing a large number of people." There is a course brochure, very simplified English but an enormous tonnage of reading. Boy-boy is the only one of twenty who finished the course. He set up his company, BM Furnishing Wisdom, and now while he waits for customers he experiments with his own designs, such as the one I am sitting on.

An emissary arrives from Mxolisi and says it is time to go. I say: "you can go, I'm still busy." The emissary agonises visibly over how to transmit this reply. Not finding an answer he sits on the floor in a corner and falls instantly asleep, snoring loudly.

Boy-boy tells me that my chair is made from used wood that he has "found around the township". It is part of a suite of three chairs and a table, which he hopes to sell at "maybe it can be R600". He identifies the other parts of the suite. These are made of varied materials ranging from orange-painted boxwood to mahogany-veneered chipboard, held together by used nails of assorted sizes and metals. "Most unfortunately", he says, "I do not have the capital for paint."

Meantime he continues his studies. He presents the notes from his last lecture, which explain how to keep Minutes, how to record Apologies, and that you must conclude with Date of Next Meeting. Everybody, he says, holding up the notes in acknowledgement of the effort that has gone into them, must work hard to find ways ahead for the youth. The CMDA continues to help, the only problem is that most unfortunately they cannot give financial support. As I stand up to say good-bye I hear wood split in my chair.

Mxolisi and team, now four, are waiting. Mxolisi says I am now to have lunch - "real African food, not pizza and salad." The only small thing is we must pass Rufi's garage, because the car is out of petrol from showing me around. Message received.

Rufi's maroon Porsche, ND 911 6, is on the forecourt. (911 1 - 5 inclusive were already taken). Rufi is not an unequivocal fan of CMDA's activities. "They have caused a lot of disruption. Now they are widening the road and eating my space. But I'm very happy, I've been here twenty years, I'm here till ten at night. You'd expect I would be nervous, an Indian in a black area, but they know me, there are no problems, that's Cato Manor."

We arrive at the home with the real African food. It is also a home with a loo, for which I am grateful. The execution of this gratitude is hampered by two realities: (a) the loo is off the kitchen, where amiably uniligual ladies are preparing real African food, and (b) the door is broken off its frame.

The technique is to pick the door up and prop it against the frame. You can't however prop it flush against the frame because the frame is squiff, so the door falls inward and bops your head while in disadvantaged position. Thus you prop diagonally. Whereupon children peep through in fascinated disbelief - Mlungu! Hawu! - with constant risk of the bottom of the door sliding back until it bashes your toes and provides the kitchen ladies with a ringside view of the interior and its occupant.

On re-emerging I discover that the entire guard corps have departed, pursuing an urgent mission on the far side of Durban which has been delayed several days while the petrol tank awaited replenishing.

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Among the possible problems that this departure presents, loneliness does not appear to feature. The house's population is about twenty people at any given moment, alternating rapidly. Communication however is restricted to three themes, none of them information-bearing: the sun is shining today, I see you are cooking lovely food, yes it is true I do not have a car.

After a while two people with basic English arrive together; David and David. David Ngwenya or David IV is the more active conversationalist. His opening gambit is: "How do you live South Africa."

In my world the question of how one lives in South Africa is a common one, dealing with the balance between the downs of crime and decline and the ups of sun and bushveld and being hooked on Africa. I'm a little surprised to find it emerging here, but reinforced in the belief that you can never pigeon-hole people into group compartments. I launch into my favourite answer about the dimensions and rewards that high heterogeneity offers to those who grasp them.

David looks bemused, and says: "No, I want to go where I can make money in dollars."

What I heard as "live" was intended as "leave". David is "very skilled first class" at erecting shutters for concrete pouring, and is sure that all he needs to get into America or Britain or Germany, preferably America because they have Michael Jackson, is to know where to apply for the visa.

David V leans towards the taciturn. After we're all through our pap 'n vleis and he hasn't said as much as pass the salt, I seek to engage him.

"So how are things here in Cato Manor?"

"Not bad but not so good."

"Ahah. I see. Has the CMDA work made a difference, would you say?"

"It has made a difference but not so much."

After lunch the Davids send children to buy beer, two quarts. The children return promptly and are castigated for not getting the bottles opened. David IV is for sending them back but David V says he'll do it. He takes up the lady of the house's

kitchen brush, home made with a wooden handle. The bottles are more stubborn than he expects, but he perseveres and finally triumphs. The brush handle is now a stumpy mass of splinters. David V glowers at it reproachfully and kicks it into the street.

The Davids nod off, the womenfolk are all asleep in one small room, the children are scattered. I reflect admiringly on times I've wished I had the courage to fall asleep on my guests. But I'm awake now, and there's nothing to read, so I amble.

Which is tantamount to saying "I get lost." The one thing follows the other like calves follow cows, and is not unwelcome. In the suburbs walking is just exercise. Here it's meeting, greeting and getting to know. Setting aside the Number One dominant fact you get to know - that everyone wants a job - it is an extraordinarily warm experience delivering huge diversity and (nearly) undiluted acceptance.

Like Derek of the bone-crusher handshake. Derek must have been sick the day they did Zulu handshaking etiquette - polite equals limp. He is also soft-spoken to inaudibility. Elsewise he's a casting director's dream of the Classic Zulu, big and strong and dark. "I'm a plumber. I do the properly job. I was working for Sherwood Plumbers but I left because I was unhappy. I do the job, me, not my boss, but I was getting a hundred rand a day and he was charging me out at a hundred rand a hour. That is not right, you know. If you are Indian, if you are whiteman, you must treat us right. We must be partners. You know we cannot progress without you. But you must treat us fair.

"Now I have no job. I can work for you, any job, plumbing or any. Even in Johannesburg I can work for you. You are fair. I must work for fair man. CMDA? No! I cannot work that place. No, those people it is 'ANC, ANC', I cannot go that place. No I am not Inkatha, not with any. I am on my own. Yes I did say I can work for anybody. Except CMDA. You cannot go these ANC places."

Like Angela, who had been battling for a while already even before her husband was shot. She was domestic, kitchens, but her back was bad and she asked for time off and they said 'you can go, then.' So she went. Then in January they shot her

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policeman husband in Umbilo, dead. She's been looking for work since January, still looking. Did she think of trying CMDA? "No, that place it is for the people they know. Those people they are friends with Mlaba<sup>18</sup>. They are friends with Ministers. That is not for ordinary Zulus."

Like the lady with the magnificent garden. "I am full time at St Theresa's Catholic Home, There it is fine, and in my garden it is fine, but I get so worried, our children get all the qualifications and there is no job. What are they to do? Here in Cato Manor CMDA is trying. They try, but there is far to go. I am never sure what is CMDA and what is Metro, but I congratulate someone on the new street sweeping. Women are sweeping the street weekly. That is picking us up."

Like Thandiwe the community leader coming from a committee meeting, in leadership regalia like a cross between a nun and a traffic cop. "No, you cannot just ask me questions. I must know who you are. What is your agenda? You could be something different from what you say you are... I don't know 'different like what', you could have another agenda. You can phone to make an appointment, and don't think you can just speak to the community just like that. You must go through us. We are the leaders, without us you won't get by."

Like Arnold the Kaizer Chiefs fanatic. I ask Arnold why every second car has a Chiefs sticker; don't some people support the province's teams like Amazulu or Golden Arrows? Arnold is nonplussed. He says it would make no sense to support a local team when you could support Chiefs. Doesn't that mean the whole league becomes a shadow for one team, a Johannesburg team at that? "No, some people still support Pirates<sup>19</sup>."

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<sup>18</sup> Durban's mayor, possibly the most all-round popular figure, Mandela aside, in the whole political jungle, and someone of whom no-one in the loop would talk the way that Angela takes as natural.

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<sup>19</sup> Orlando Pirates, just as Johannesburg as Kaizer Chiefs (and the original kingpins from whom Chiefs broke away decades ago).

Like the Gogo and the Babamkhulu<sup>20</sup> hoeing their property. Two grandchildren push the wheelbarrow, which weighs more than they do. They push the barrow to the street corner, twenty metres away, dump the weeds in a no-man's-land, and come back for the next load. Kids in my part of town would be screeching for Child Welfare inspectors, or pointing at their watches and saying it's Bold And Beautiful time. These kids work on, though only half as hard as the grandparents. The Gogo says they're preparing a vegetable garden. She says: "these children's mothers are our daughters. They have gone away but the children are with us. Thanks be to God."

Like, also, the drunks at the shebeen<sup>21</sup>. Oh, drunks, equally boring whether peasant or prince. One should steer clear. But they come running out of the shebeen, bottles in hand: "Come, come, be our guest." A ou<sup>22</sup> feels rude, walking on with nose in the air. Anyway they only look half drunk, and they're certainly vocal. They're graduates and lecturers, they make a point of proclaiming. You think you'll get insights. But of course what you get is Round Two. When they have you seated - on the rickety table-less bench that skirts the barren unadorned walls, shebeen standard - they have to shove liquor down your throat. It's their life's mission. You are their New Best Friend, they must buy you beer. I say no-thanks, thankyou-no, no, not-now, no-I-will-not-have-a-beer. I say a hundred synonyms, a thousand times. The nagging goes on. Finally there is no alternative. I resort to drastic meas-

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<sup>20</sup> *Granny & Grandad.*

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<sup>21</sup> *Famous South African word that arrived by magic from 19th century Ireland, meaning illegal drinking place populated by black people. Until the 1970s white man's liquor was seriously taboo for blacks, in the eyes of the law. Shebeens got whapped and raided with meaning. Since then "illegal" has become a more philosophical concept. Nowadays no-one except a guy in a Public Works office somewhere knows whether any particular shebeen is illegal. We do know we're supposed to call them "Taverns" now, so they won't sound black. We also know that people who frequent them don't bother much about supposed.*

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<sup>22</sup> *Male person, from "ou kêrel", "old chap", but long since converted to a noun.*

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ures. I say, "Thanks, I'll have a Coke."

That puts an end to it. The graduates and the lecturers are subdued, for several seconds. A random passing child is mournfully commissioned to go get Coke, not a commodity on which this shebeen will waste fridge space. My mind's ear picks out words in the buzz, words that go with the furrowed brows and sombre discourse. Tsk, no imoto and he phuzas iCoke. A weird one, this one.

It transpires that the graduates, two, are not, well, *graduates* in the sense of having, like, graduated; more in the line of possible future graduates. One silent young guy is first-year at Tech, pharmaceuticals. The louder claimant to the title is on a break from his studies, the subject of which temporarily eludes him. He is resuming next year for sure, definite, they're keeping his place for him, at Westville University.

The lecturers are measured not precisely in the plural. They consist of a fellow who says he used to give economics tutorials at the University of Natal Durban, just over there on the horizon, but is now between jobs.

To these two, Westville and UND, the others defer. Or maybe it's that the others can't get a word in. These two are keen that I get a proper understanding of Cato Manor, namely that it is messed up by foreigners sent by the EU. "They pretend they're coming to help, but their real agenda is to tell us how to run our country." Also, "the CMDA does not consult. They do not sit with us for deep talk. They just hide in that building that they think is an African design, and give orders."

When Westville's quart empties he makes very certain that this reality is not lost on me, but my hands stay in my pockets and he wanders off. UND, relishing the now unrivalled access to his audience's ear, promises to tell me "the whole truth about this place, the real, hard, truth". He shoves away a quiet labourer beside me and sits on the bench. A minute later he loses his thread. He spends the rest of our acquaintance trying to recover it, in wordless cross-eyed concentration.

Other shebeners now move in, Wiseman, Richard and Gideon. Richard says he is happy that I visit. He is very happy. He is very, very happy. Our country is now

complete, now that I have visited. Richard keeps on being happy. He keeps on being very happy. He keeps on being very, very happy. But the happier he gets, the more he is troubled by his biography, which is in rapid flux.

At first he is a Qualified Mechanic. Next beer he is still a qualified mechanic but, because of oppression, is not called that. He is called Assistant Mechanic, a term he spits out with hatred. A little later he is not quite an Assistant Mechanic either, he is an Experienced Informal Mechanic, who can do “even jobs that those other ones, with the piece of paper, can not do.”

My heart reaches to Richard. He is gravely burdened. I cannot tell which of the rival possibilities is closer to truth. We may have someone who does not know enough to know that he does not know. We may have a natural mechanic, thwarted by bureaucratic formality. I've seen both, each is tragic. We do have an unhappy customer.

Wiseman is between jobs. I ask what job he was in before he was between jobs. He says he was between jobs then too. Gideon has blue overalls with paint flecks from every point of the rainbow. I guess he's a painter. He thinks I'm clairvoyant. But I'm wrong, where it matters. He's a painter by trade, yes, but has been between jobs since 1999.

Does anybody here have a plain ordinary okay job? I extend the survey. David (another) is a welder. He has piece jobs but is planning to leave for a place of greater opportunity, “perhaps Johannesburg, or England”. Zakhele got a matric in 1989 and a job in 1990. In 1991 the company closed because of accidental mistake. Staff were told they'd be contacted when accidental mistake was fixed. “At the present time I am still floating.”

Last there's Mondli. Mondli has a fine job, he lays pipes. He knows how to lay pipes, he's happy laying pipes, no oppressors do him dirt, he will soon be a foreman pipe-layer, his pay is alright, everything is alright, especially his boss, “very good man, love man”.

Mondli is love man too. I want to hug him. For the rest I want to weep, and that's

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on Coke. For them and for this whole goddam tragedy that we insist on closing our political correct eyes to. Houses, drains, great. But if we arranged things to give people work the houses and drains would follow. If we don't find the work, houses and drains will crumble.

Outside is a hulk, once rakish and sporty, now smashed and rusted to bits, every portion decrepit save a sign on the bumper: SIMPLY JESUS. Why these guys drink so much beer may be understandable, but How is not. How do they pay? With what? Why is everyone clothed and shoed and looking okay? Why are there no visible down-and-outs? A child pushes a toy back and forth. It's a plastic Jik bottle with wheels; half the old traditional wire car, still more admirable than the packaged version of suburbia. Everybody treats the street as dustbin, old and young. Indiscriminate junk, wrappings/cardboards/cans. Also bottles, whether broken or not is immaterial unless they're deposit-bearing. Do Anti-Litter Campaigns one day become superfluous? Do people get the message, even in Africa? Which century would that be? Why is no-one in Zulu regalia? No tribal outfits, not one. For that matter hardly any Sunday Best either; everyone in jeans and T-shirt. And slip-slops.

## 4. OVERLY PRIVILEGED AND DEEPLY RELIEVED

**J**OYCE HAS BEEN IN MY MIND ALL DAY. I'M STAYING WITH HER. SHE'S expecting me; I should not be late. It's probably a biggish thing, I allow myself to imagine, a house-guest of a surely unexpected kind. I've brought a copy of my book on the flag - lots of pictures, a bit of text, our common South Africanism, indubitably appropriate.

It's dark before I am walked from Fast Track East to Dunbar. I hope Joyce is not drumming her fingers over the supper table. We cross the corner of Dunbar Road and Dunbar Road, two signs at right-angles on the same pole. A postman's life would be challenging, were there postmen.

Dunbar is not among Cato Manor's uplifted quarters. Joyce's home is no more than average, although she is a Leader of The People. That's why she was fingered as hostess, for deep talk after supper. There is something nice in a people's leader who lives like the people she leads; something disturbing in why that situation should be noteworthy.

Joyce is not home. Several people are. To a man, woman, or child they are glued to Oprah, to the exclusion of distractions such as the arrival of a guest. Oprah is praising 50-year-olds who make themselves look 25. She has competition from a high-volume off-station Zulu radio programme.

When Joyce comes home the Oprah-watchers again do not look up. I approach with hand extended. Joyce seems to think I have a stiff arm. She says something brief in Zulu and points me to the next room. I revise the assumption that my visit constitutes an event. By gesture I learn that I am sleeping in one of two parallel beds, separated by a slim gap. The other bed is hers.

I experience alarm, for a reason that could be hard to explain across language and culture. The awkward truth is: there is a thing about snoring.

I know this thing from my wife, who has developed expert silencing techniques involving knees and elbows. I am loath to expose foreign ears to the glories of what I am assured is top-class snoring prowess, and more loath to have foreign fists experiment with antidotes.

Joyce has not waited for discussion. I'm alone in the bedroom with a few hundred decibels of distorting electronic sound, American/Zulu. I sit on my allocated bed with contemplative intent, but the bed sags sharply. I lurch back and bang my head on the wall. I see by experiment that I have a very bow-shaped night to come, and do not predict a high quotient of deep sleep. At least that should allay Joyce's problems on the snoring front

The bed being an imperfect venue for further contemplation, I return to the living room. The congregation has dwindled and Oprah has given way to a kung fu movie. The remaining viewers are still too riveted to return a greeting, or to nod.

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With not much idea what else to do, I sit, and wait.

After many minutes a youth says: "I want to be a movie star. Where must I apply?"

In career guidance terms the question beats me, but part of its purpose is as ice-breaker. For the umpteenth time (and the third since the sun last rose) I am reminded that Africa's famous openness bumps into complicated smallprint when it comes to private homes. Why, I know not. There may be anxieties about meeting expectations. I know only that what looks like cold shoulder, or even a convincing appearance of hostility, is often social panic in disguise.

We discuss, amiably but on different tracks. The youth's world emits from the screen. He is scandalised when I confuse Jackie Chan for Bruce Lee, and dismissive when I touch on the health & welfare of Cato Manor. He indicates that Cato Manor is merely where his feet are sentenced to walk; his head is way above humdrum reality, flying with Shania Twain.

Shania Twain may be a fine travelling companion but my own head is stuck in humdrum reality. The evening is not holding out as much hope as formerly of delivering enlightenment in this respect. I resolve to stick it out nonetheless.

But resolve shatters when the most humdrum of all realities intercedes. Nature calls. My movie-minded friend guides me to the facilities. This does not mean pointing to a door and saying "there you go". It means a walk into the night, yards of blind navigation over ruts and very suspicious rivulets, no torch, no lantern. Such artefacts are apparently considered low-class, inconsistent with an electrified household.

I stick it out until we get within smelling distance of the conveniences. I feel like I have hit an olfactory wall. I can go no further. I know this with finality. Martial law takes over the nervous system, freezes the gastric cables, and permits the brain only one function, which is to envisage the digestive processes destined to occur before morning. I have to leave.

Joyce is upset that I'm not staying over. Her delightful daughter Dolly, newly

arrived, explains: Joyce intends going into bed-&-breakfast. She hoped I'd be her test case. I say I'm sure there is great potential, but a little tweaking may be in order.

The flag book no longer seems right. I present a more useful form of thanks. The entire household, which had managed not a word of welcome, turns out to bid copious words of farewell. The TV blares to an empty room, which I suspect is a novel experience. Dolly and her small child walk me a goodly way along one of the Dunbar Roads to a person who has a car. The road has indefinite edges and no lighting. Never before have I appreciated how valuable a thing is a pavement. The child hops and skips in beautiful insouciance while vehicles hurtle past. Were I hooked to a heart monitor, alarms would clang.

The person who has a car, Jimmy, also has a shebeen. After short negotiation he locks up the liquor, telling his indignant customers to wait. He, Dolly and the child take me off. Jimmy talks thoughtfully of the philosophy of religion; Dolly talks excitedly of her brand new job, starting tomorrow as secretary of the school where she was once a pupil; the child tugs quizzically at my hair and runs exploring fingers down my cheeks.

I love them all and in principle I'd like this drive to go on for a very long time, barring certain humdrum realities related to defrosting cables. But the drive is startlingly short. In five minutes we are in a classically leafy suburb.

Cato Manor has been a township since before townships were invented. It was the outskirts of the Durban of the mid 19th century, meaning it is amazingly central to the Durban of the early 21st. I had not fully imbibed the significance. In my city, squatterland is something that the middle classes hear of from the media; something over the hill and far away. Here squatterland is over the road; divided by a thin strip of asphalt from The Berea, the epitome of Old Durban Elegance.

Logically that should mean that the Durban Establishment is a good deal quicker to put its weight into helping create stability and order. Not that logic is a rule or anything, in socio-political conduct, but at minimum the proximity must give the local gentry a different perspective. Mind, given human nature perhaps not a

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more benign perspective.

Jimmy and Dolly and Junior draw up at what turns out to be a Rolls Royce of guesthouses, and like protective parents delivering their child to a party they insist on ascertaining that all is well. I'm not at all sure that this is a good idea.

J & D & J are fine people and I am on edge lest the proprietors express unbenign views regarding their presence in the driveway. As I ring the doorbell (the gate was open) I am primed for defence.

I did not need to worry. The proprietors are civil and warm to all, and J & D reciprocate their warmth graciously. This is what the new mutually respectful nation is supposed to be. And it's so easy. And so elating. So why is it so bloody rare?

Junior clammers in my arms and squeezes my neck like I'm his favourite uncle. Dolly hugs goodbye with a wondrous merger of affection and dignity. I could swear there's a moist corner in her eye and my manly instincts are hoping no-one looks too closely at my own eye. Shakes and hugs with Jimmy. Waves until the car is out of the driveway. Very hard to believe that less than an hour ago we had never heard of each other. Ah Africa! It can give you pain, alright, but it gives you the other thing too.

By this point I of course feel a bit of a wuss. When I meet my bedroom with full quota of bells & whistles plus en-suite bathroom I feel a disgustingly over-privileged bit of a wuss. But I am also a deeply relieved disgustingly over-privileged bit of a wuss. I hope I snore like mad all night; the walls can take it.

Early morning, a short suburban stroll. A view from a different street. Pedestrians come in two kinds. Residents, jogging or walking their dogs, are eminently middle-class and as uniformly white [in my small sample] as in the old days. But there are also many people from across the strip of asphalt, some doubtless employed, some work-seeking, and some presumably reconnoitring for chinks in fences. They walk faster than they do across the road and are surprised to be greeted. They're not at home, in any way.

I speak to a few of the dog-walkers. One, asked for a fix on the state of play in

the neighbourhood, has much to unload: "I must tell you that not one of them has ever done us one little bit of harm. No harm at all, nothing but respect. But they are still a hell of a problem. Our property value is shot to hell. They're here all day long looking for work; it's a nuisance and it makes you feel terrible. You can do nothing for them. You know there's nothing for them. You feel bad seeing them.

"What's worse is the shooting. Every night there is shooting. It wakes you up, it makes you frightened. It's having a hell of an effect on our daughter, who we teach to believe in peace and love and a decent world. She goes to sleep every night hearing death and pain and conflict. It's a big problem. We always believed in Africa, we had hope in Africa, we objected when relatives and friends ran away from Africa. Now we know we're going that way too."

The others... Nearly everyone brings up property values, mainly phlegmatically. Some know nothing of a development effort. Of those who do, most see it as an admirable effort but a lost cause, swamped by the squatter tide. One knows that the CMDA is closing and believes this is a death-knell. One says "you know, there are seven schools there now. There used to be none. If you give them long enough they'll live like us". All say they would never go into Cato Manor.

What strikes me most about what they say is what they don't say. Not one person talks of "kaffirs" for instance, and hardly anyone even of "Afs" or "zots" or any of the softer disrespects. People mainly say "people". While no-one evinces any thought of taking up neighbourly cudgels in a joint uplift endeavour, neither does anyone rant or bluster or threaten. Proximity may do little to concentrate the mind in purposeful directions, but I have the sense that it at least exerts a maturing effect.

For breakfast the world's friendliest waiter proudly promises me "exactly what you like." He says it twice: it's full free choice. I ask for one hard egg with a sausage and fried tomato. He delivers two soft eggs with mushroom and a yard-wide smile. Half an hour later I find myself on yet another Cato Manor hilltop, inspecting a drain in the company of a contractor, Joe.

"When I started working here I was full of the 'teach a man to fish' idea", says

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Joe. “Now I know that it doesn’t work that way. You don’t just teach a man to fish. You fish with him. You bait the hook, you cast the line, you strike, you reel it in. You thank him for catching the fish, you pay him for catching the fish, you give him a prize for catching the fish, you give him the fish and you start again, bait the hook, cast the line... Over and again I do the ordering, I take delivery, I design, plan, and bring the tools. Then somebody steals the pipes. This is the third time I have built this drain. I doubt it will be the last.”

I leave Joe to his drain and walk. Not far away there is a hall. The hall is locked but outside it a Health class is on the go. Twenty or thirty women are sitting on the ground with notepads. Two words are written on a board - “chairperson” and “agenda”. An instructor is pointing at these words and explaining their use.

A passer-by pauses. This, he tells me, is Extension 3 Hall. It was built long ago but has never been opened, due to a conflict between two power-wielders. He says that many public buildings erected in the last few years are not used, sometimes because of turf wars, sometimes because “people do not know for what they can use them.” In his view CMDA’s “very good work” was the formation of a soccer league with “more than twenty teams.” He is not sure whether the league is still operative, he suspects it has wound up in preparation for CMDA’s closing.

A crèche; nearly all wall posters are English - Days of the Week; Your Doctor and Your Teeth, and, bafflingly, “Phased Organised Environment.” A teacher says there are 94 children. The school provides breakfast and lunch. Parents pay R70 a month. There is no subsidy. The work is most rewarding, “you are helping to bring the people up, we will be more up in coming years.” Problems are only two. (1) Working parents. Some collect their children as late as half past eight or nine o’clock, and teachers must still get home. (2) Non-working parents. None pay full fee and most pay no fee.

The Umkhumbane Library. Very new, very huge, very classy. Thirty tables, 120 chairs. Eclectic material with a strong smack of donation from lobbyists and propagation groups: the Royal Horticultural Society’s Pests And Diseases; Jesus Lived

In India; Ways To Start And Expand A Women's Biblical Ministry...

There are thirty or more people, mainly children. It would be a stretch to say they are "reading". Some are in reveries, some are leafing. But all are undergoing an exposure to the world of print, which seems to me a fundamental plus. Standing in a corner and surveying the undergoing of this exposure it hits me that I have seen the inside of two handfuls of Cato Manor homes, with I think not a shred of reading matter in any of them.

The librarian, Sibongile, tells me that the great difference between present and past is that there were only shacks, now there are houses too. "People think of themselves more proudly". Also, there are classes for "business and planting and gardening; people are becoming interested in self-improvement." Her assistant is saddened that children often cannot get library cards, as their parents will not or can not sign the application form.

The library building has its own hall (and its own hilltop, as gloriously panoramic as any.) The hall is bare but for one small table, two chairs and two people - a young man and a schoolgirl in uniform, facing each other over the table. This is private talk. I nod an apology and make to do the revolving-door, but the man calls, no, no.

He turns out to be a highly enthusiastic emissary of the Glenridge Church, conducting an outreach project. He is proud of a Glenridge lady with a Greek name who has initiated both this project and a scheme promoting mother's milk. He himself is from another township (Montclair?), where people have a low opinion of Cato Manor.

"They say 'shame, shame.' They think Cato Manor is for homeland people who ran away from faction fights. They think these people do nothing for themselves. I thought that before I came here. But here it is exciting. Our work is to help young children who are hurting, we build capacity, we lead them towards self-esteem. We provide them with someone to trust. There is real development here, not just houses and lights; development in people. This is a community moving up."

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Transcribed into print, the young man looks more PR-ish than he came across in life, where expression and tone do much to defuse buzzword and cliché. Still, I niggle and sting a little, aiming to unearth whatever thorns lurk inside his rosy account. He has only one real downside: “It is sad that influx makes it difficult. Your home-boy comes, he needs a place for a few days. You put him on your kitchen floor. Next week he has a tin room outside the kitchen, next month it is a shack, it is his home. He is paying you R30 or R60, his girlfriend moves in, then her brother comes from Nqutu where there is no work. Next month, two shacks.”

I can feel it. The Side of the Angels frantically erecting hope and systems, scurrying to keep ahead of the Ogre of Destitution which is lolloping up behind with mighty bared fangs. I'd willingly enquire further along this avenue, but not here. The schoolgirl at the table has said nothing. I don't think she has once looked up. I assume she is one of the hurting children, being capacity-built towards self-esteem. I am stealing her builder.

I bid both goodbye - she doesn't seem to notice - and am half out the door.

“Excuse me sir.”

The girl has found her voice. I turn.

“I can please say something?”

This thing is not easy to say. I get an impression of earnest inner turmoil. She has been plucking up courage, offended by my stings and niggles.

“When we came here after my father's murder we were in a shack, we did not live like people. Now we are in a house, we walk high. When we came there was shooting every night. I was crying every night. Now, many nights, many nights, there is no shooting.”

She has delivered her load. She takes up a do-your-worst stance like Joan of Arc at the stake, ready to defend Cato Manor against bullying questions.

I'm all out of bullying questions. I can only gulp. I go back to the table and shake her hand and say thankyou. She wipes her eyes with her sleeve.

In fact, I'm all out of all questions. Or, better, I'm over-buffed by answers. There

are too many of them. Too many streets, too many views. I've heard that things are better, that things are worse, that things are the same. I've heard that CMDA delivers, that it doesn't deliver, that it delivers the wrong things. I've heard that CMDA's impending closure is tragic, that it doesn't matter, and that it's good ("all it is here for is to provide jobs for whites").

I know the value of the outside eye, even the outside eye of the infamous "parachute journalist", who drops in on someone else's world for five minutes and then goes back to the edit-suite with Pronouncements. The outside eye has a babes-and-sucklings quality. First sight can be struck by things that experienced sight takes for granted. It can detect wood through the trees of familiarity. But it has limits. It can see, sometimes usefully, but in respect of understanding what is behind what it sees, it must defer.

I'm supposed to divine a thread of public attitude running through this jungle of diverse opinion? I can divine nothing beyond a doubt that any such thread exists. If I have to Pronounce, I Pronounce in one line: the view from the street is mixed.

I walk back to headquarters. It's a goodly walk, even though I no longer lose my way even once. My imoto-less prying has become something of a talking-point, it appears. Several people volunteer added testimonies along the way. One says: "Even if CMDA did everything perfectly, our people would want more. We expect much, and complain that what we get is less than we think we should get." Another tells me: "When CMDA goes we are supposed to make development ourselves. But I don't think." Another: "Many years the development has been slow, slow, now they are going and it is hurry, hurry, hurry and build. It is just so they get their pay."

There's more, but my receptors are fading. Approaching the CMDA offices I take my first solid look at the building.

An interesting principle. Throughout South Africa the new name of the architectural game is Africanise. The years that we sought to look like London-in-the-Sun have slammed into reverse; rather a Congo-in-the-South, or at any rate an idealised

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image of what an African architecture might have been had it gone beyond grass and dagha.

SAA's new lounges score jackpot; an unmistakably African flavour that also out-firsts the First World's comforts. Decades-old shopping centres in Johannesburg have latched on to branches - plain wattle branches cut from that [despised alien] tree. Scatter them in panels on walls and ceilings, and voila! The flavour of Africa at less cost than wallpaper. Africa triumphs, interior-wise, but African exteriors remain, uh, exploratory.

CMDA's exploration goes as far as any exterior yet. Alan Lipman analyses it in an article pinned to the reception notice-board: the building takes caricatures and combines them - 'Loud/cheap' with 'polished/polite'; 'informal/temporary' with 'formal/permanent', etc. Never mind that the effect is distinctive and, to this subjective mind, attractive, it's deliciously pioneering. It symbolises Africa's clock turning forward.

Pity the place has to be secured like Fort Knox. Very unAfrican, finally, but that's Africa, a paradox. Worse, walking towards it I feel a sinking sensation in the pit; if a year after CMDA's departure this edifice is another jumble of broken windows and mismatched shutter-boards, the symbolism will be grim. I try to kick myself for admitting such unpatriotic thoughts but the kicking doesn't work. The thoughts are not schadenfreudic dredgings of a Eurocentric mind. They are compelled by experience.

At the CMDA office I am due to meet the chairman, Willies Mchunu. Willies is late, and rushed. He is Deputy Speaker of the KwaZulu Natal Assembly, and has an important appointment there. Having depleted my shoe leather to make this appointment here, I am tempted towards irritation, but Willies' warmth deflects wrath.

Willies' special pride is the Cato Manor Community Organisation, his baby. "When I came in I saw that what was lacking was how the community fitted in. I set up the CMCO and arranged means of election. I envisaged that the members

would help report back to the community, but to practically implement that proved a bit difficult. They needed lots of training and we did not have time for that. We are still struggling with training.

"I ask myself, would it be wrong to pay CMCO members? Would it be wrong to pay even for transport for CMCO members? We transport Board members, should we transport CMCO too? But then, are we compromising their independence? In any case, fully fledged payment would generate competition and tensions as people scrambled. It would be unhealthy at this stage, although it will be a lesser problem when we have fulfilled the task of developing."

This looks paradoxical by any standards. If the organisation is a vital component in the task of developing, do you ever fulfil that task without ensuring that the right people compete to be in the organisation, and can afford to get to meetings? Willies says: "the sense of contribution is its own reward. Most members are a product of the former struggle<sup>23</sup>. They know the structures, they know how to sacrifice for the common good, coupled with their desire to add to their own lives, their own needs as residents. Now we have eventually arrived at a change of quality, the real leaders are being put forward. We have thoroughly workshopped the constitution, into a system where members are not exactly elected as such, they are put forward by the structures."

That sounds like saying that being ANC is a prerequisite - ? "Not at all. Our non-political approach has been very effective. If others were not satisfied, I'm sure they would have let us know."

I try to imagine an Inkatha peasant knocking on the Community Organisation's door. "Morning, all. Thought I'd drop in to let you know that I am not quite satisfied." My imagination seems to be fading. Maybe it's be age. Instead I ask Willies about the implications of CMDA closing.

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<sup>23</sup> *A universally understood South African code way of saying they belong to the ruling party, the African National Congress*

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"We still need a structure to ensure continuity, we need something similar to CMDA, to assist the community organisation. If development is not sustained it will not continue. All agree that if there is no structure, things will collapse. Finding the structure is the main issue now under discussion. Durban Metro alone will not be able to do it. Metro does not yet have that capacity."

I mention the recidivist concern about CMDA being white-run. Willies replies: "We have had a racial past, we must accept that. The reality is that skills were afforded to other race groups at the expense of the African people. I have been very involved in removing race from CMDA and on that score I feel bad. All African people with skills are running into government, for security, for greener pastures, and for status. CMDA pays less than government, it has less status than government. Our people run to government departments. Continuity is a big problem."

I ask for an understanding of why the Extension 3 Hall is closed. Willies doubts that I have correct information. In any case, he says, he is now badly late for his meeting at the Legislature. Fortunately he has brought two young men with him to give me a view from the people, and they happen to be chairman and deputy chairman of the relevant community. Willies introduces me to the young men and departs. Pilane and Tai (he was a Tai Chi fan as a child) are so young that I am repeatedly startled by their frequent use of the term "we the community leaders." They are engaging and articulate and full of stories of past problems now overcome. In the past CMDA built too few houses, too small, with the wrong materials in the wrong place. It also had "bad attitude." But now it is the new phase, with their committee involved. CMDA "now has trust" and houses are being built "with our own construction company from our own people and they are very good." The committee has a permanent Liaison Officer, a paid employee although the chairman is not sure how he is paid, who keeps constant check on standards. The only problem is that only ten showhouses have been so far built under the new phase. There were supposed to be many.

Now “even we the community leaders are worried about how the projects will be finished. Eish, when the EU pulls out we don’t think things will go on. The CMCO will acquire the assets, like this building. They have reported to us that they have problems with CMDA, problems in communication, but now we have elected new representatives, they must push to keep things going.”

Tai says that the “issue” of an over-supply of whites in CMDA is no issue at all. “We are not looking in colour lines. You can be white and doing better things for us. If you are black and do not do your job we will want you removed, same as anyone else. Even white people from the suburb have been helpful, like the Roman Catholics. We are separated from the suburb by just a street, you know.”

Pilane says the Extension 3 Hall was supposed to be opened last year. A function was arranged, but it did not happen. He thinks it was because the developers mistakenly gave the keys to Durban Metro. There is a luxury caretakers’ residence, a two-bedroom house, that has also never been used. It is a problem.

I venture that a problem more than half a year old is a problem whose cause the committee in charge might be expected to have queried. He says: “To be honest we have not exercised our right to question why.”

I ask what the two of them do other than committee work. Tai has a certificate in video technology and is waiting for an opportunity in that field, Meanwhile he is self-employed in “a cleaning and security firm, not big time.” Pilane is the Deputy Speaker’s driver. I say: “Oh. Well I am sorry to have caused the Deputy Speaker to have to go off without you.” Pilane says “No, he hasn’t gone anywhere, look, these are the car keys.”

## 5. A LITTLE DIFFICULTY WITH THE PIANO KEYS

**M**Y IMOTO-FREE HOLIDAY IN CATO MANOR WILL LIVE IN MY HEAD, AND more particularly soul, well after respectable career-building experiences of the same vintage sink into the mists.

If one suspends the critical faculties and allows the vibe and humanity to flow, you come away loving a place like this, loving its people, loving its marvellous mysteries, loving its very incomprehensibility, feeling stimulated and strong about neighbourhood and nation.

But that fuzzy complacency takes strain when the cold side of the brain is engaged, the side that frets about incomes and security and the growth and advance of people for whom growth and advance matters most. Will Cato Manor in ten years or fifty be a place of reasonable contentment, a place where gunshots cause astonishment, where a career is a commonplace thing, where “theft” and “home industry” are separate concepts, where dissatisfied “others” have actual methods of raising their views, where “lack of capacity” and “transformation” are no longer inseparable twins? It would take a bold bookmaker to make odds on that.

Which would be an easy and obvious point for this report to sign off. It would also be a cop-out point to sign off - barely better than that hallmark of conclusion-less journalism, the valediction “time will tell”. It is nonetheless where I would have signed off but that this is a *report*, not just “an article”.

Being a *report*, there are *procedures*. One of these is a seminar where report-writers get together in academic fashion to savage each other’s reports in the name of intellectual rigour. At least, that’s what they do in Johannesburg, to the echo of the sound Miaouw. The Durbanites were surprisingly civil even to their fellow academics - it must be something in that air - and downright polite about my contribution, unintellectual and unthreatening.

The seminar did however instruct me to add a conclusion - “a report is about les-

sons, kindly check your brief". It also gave me, unwittingly, an exhortatory shock.

I realised how massively large had been the CMDA ambition. From the writings of the professors and the doctors I saw what I had scarcely glimpsed from inside the test-tube, that the aim had been to create a model suburb. There were to be state-of-the-art public spaces, path-finding urban design. There was to be a vibrant local economy. Cato Manor was to show how to supercharge the ordinary scruffy township into a pillar of hope.

Melancholy struck me, a vision of what might have been. All along I had been locked in one frame of reference, comparing the ordinary scruffy reality with the worse reality there would have been without the input. To compare with the glowing reality that was intended to be, was a punch in the stomach. It was also a warning. If it took hundreds of millions rands of injection to make ordinary scruffiness of what would have been horrible squalor, what does it take to make a harbinger of a new era? A trillion rand? Or a revision of ground-rules?

We don't have the trillions. Best explore the ground-rules.

Like the role of whites. Within CMDA, by no means alone, there is a prevailing sense that the whites are to hand over and get out. Especially male whites and especially out of conspicuous leadership roles. To have a pair of hairy pale hands preside over the desk of a chairman or a chief executive is an embarrassment. He is supposed to have given way, and there is a tacit rank order of who he is supposed to have given way to. First prize, with oak leaf cluster, is a female person of undilutedly African ancestry. Nearly as good is her male equivalent. If you can't do that, go for a coloured or Indian person, and if you can't do that either then, very poor third, at least muster a white woman to show you're trying.

I had not known, when we wept before our screens in pride and joy on that Tenth day of May<sup>24</sup>, that this was the agenda. Nobody knew, then. There was a lot

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<sup>24</sup> 1994, the day Mandela was sworn in as president. History can seldom have known a greater moment.

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of talk about fair and square and equality and opportunity, and everybody, then, bought that talk. It was later that we drifted into something between Pandora and Frankenstein, recasting the pale male as one of nature's mistakes like mosquitoes or khakibos and thrusting the poisoned chalice at a legion of unsuspecting black people.

If there is a crueller gift than the gift of over-promotion I would like to know what it is. For the recipient, it is an insidious gift. When he is presented with a massive boost in status and income, he is ecstatic. A year later his soul is in a torture chamber. He feels a fool; he has knives in his heart from the disdain of his peers; the function that he runs is collapsing.

Society does not impose this cruelty on its cardiologists or its pilots, but considers it obligatory to impose it on its executives. Then it wonders why our second most routine news item, next to crime rising, is institutions failing.

The most widely agreed view I heard in Cato Manor was that the end of CMDA would mean the end of progress. The core of this view - view - whether expressed, circumlocuted, or tacitly hinted - was always the same. It assumed that CMDA, run by whites (by which the average Zulu means "non-Africans", regardless whether their forebears came from Bristol or Bombay) got things done that its successors, notably the Durban Metro, would not get done. Almost everyone on the street described the Metro as having become drastically more corrupt and less efficient over the last few years of becoming "representative", and believed that the current restructuring, into the acceleratedly representative Thekwini council, foreshadows further decline.

Many CMDA managers seemed to take the same view. Generally I perceived these people as keen, responsible, socially conscious - that's why they were there. Non-blacks among them took it as obvious that they had to go, to make way for "the majority". In apartheid days most of these people stood boldly for the principle of non-racism. Now they meekly submit to their own shutting-out for racial reasons, while, often, predicting glumly and off-record that the result will be wreck-

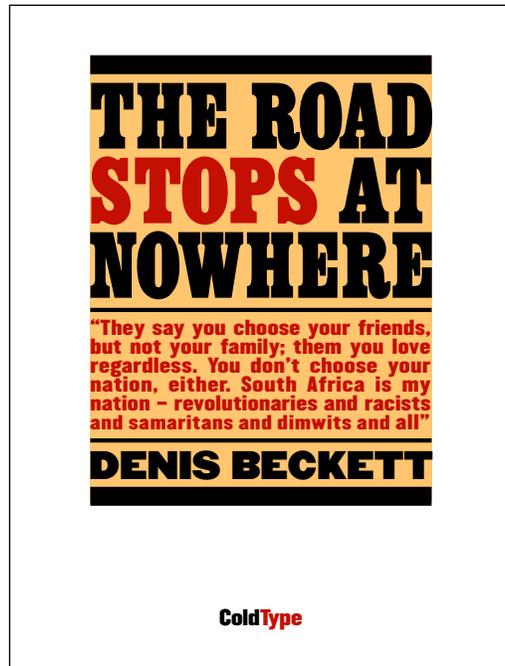
DENIS BECKETT

age. Yet they insist that so it has to be; role models must be upheld, to give the coming generation inspiration. Meantime, as one person tells me outright and I have grounds to believe others might whisper on pillows at night, some of these managers see themselves as lame ducks and work accordingly, going through the motions and occasionally remembering the past passion to contribute.

I can't see it, myself. I thought a principle was a deep thing, not a wind-vane to fly one way or the other according to headcount. I got a fair amount of inspiration from my father being a contented and competent middle manager - more, I dare say, than if they had made him chairman and he had wound up sacked, suspended, sued, or fallen on his face.

Is there a lesson? To me there is. We were going to make no sense of this country while it was white man's land with the other lot hanging around as passengers. Is there any reason to think we do better the opposite way? For decades building up to the end of the old era there was a standard metaphor or cliché at every multi-racial gathering in sight, that a piano works best when you play the black keys as well as the white. I wonder how that metaphor vanished. Works no better when you play only the black keys.





If you enjoyed  
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You'll want to read our other e-book by Denis Beckett  
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When the Beckett family of Johannesburg packed beach towels for the summer holiday they did not intend spending the ensuing weeks acquainting themselves with broiling desert roadsides, embattled third-world hospitals, or the intimate civic pathology of some of the least tourist-attractive towns on earth. Ah hah. They had reckoned without their car. Umpteen breakdowns later, journalist Denis Beckett had discovered an eighth wonder of the world: The Unreliable Vehicle, without which homo bourgeoisians would proceed eternally from A to B according to schedule. In the pages of *The Road Stops At Nowhere*, adventure story meets applied philosophy and travel tale intersects with socio-political enquiry. Three weeks overlap into timelessness; South Africa's special peculiarities bump into the universal human predicament.

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**Denis Beckett** hates being asked how he's related to Samuel — of *Waiting for Godot* etc — because Samuel was his father's cousin and he's never sure whether the correct answer is second cousin or uncle once removed. A barrister by training, Beckett defected into the South African media and the perils of opposing the apartheid system. He was executive editor of *Weekend World*, which was banned in 1977; thereafter general manager of *The Voice*, which spent 1978 and 1979 fighting banning orders; and from 1980 until 1990 he was owner, editor and chief bottle-washer of *Frontline* magazine. He is best known in South Africa for Beckett's Trek, a weekly television programme. His latest book is *Jetlag: SA Airways in the Andrews Era*, published in 2001 by Penguin Books. His new book, *Redeeming Features*, will be published in Spring 2004.

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