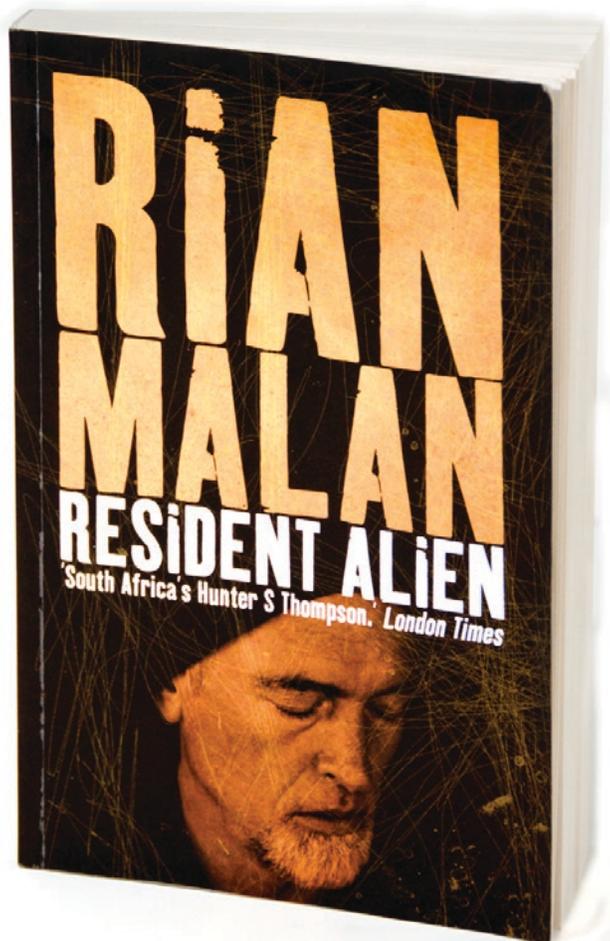
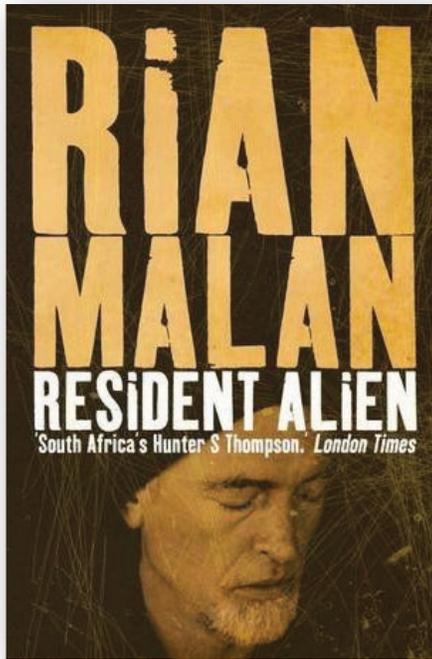


**THOSE**  
**FABULOUS**  
**ALCOCK**  
**BOYS**

ColdType



An excerpt from  
**RESIDENT ALIEN**  
By **RIAN MALAN**



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**Rian Malan**

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# THOSE FABULOUS ALCOCK BOYS

AN EXCERPT FROM **RESIDENT ALIEN** BY RIAN MALAN

**W**E'RE EN ROUTE TO AN advertising shoot and I want to know if GG is carrying a gun. Anywhere else in the world this would be a wretched pun, but here in Soweto, it seems a legitimate and fairly pressing question. I know GG owns a Colt, and that he usually stuffs it down the back of his pants. Personally, I would be reassured to know that at least one of us is armed, but I don't want to display my cowardice by saying, 'Trust you're carrying your gat, GG.'

In the bad old days, I would have been chain-smoking at this point, dreading what lay ahead. Soweto was bandit country, home to two million angry black people corralled in a grim and depressing labour barracks by the mad scientists of apartheid. Anything could happen here, but today, under the bright autumn sun, it looks oddly cheerful. Liquor billboards line the highway. The landscape is scarred with building sites where developers are erecting a billion rand's worth of shopping malls. Old Potch Road is clogged with gleaming new cars, all presumably piloted

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**Soweto was bandit country, home to 2m angry black people corralled in grim labour barracks by the mad scientists of apartheid. Anything could happen here, but today, it looks oddly cheerful**

by members of the Black Diamond tribe, a dark-skinned bourgeoisie whose numbers have grown ten-fold since Mandela came to power in 1994. The Unilever Institute, which coined the term, says Black Diamond spending power is about £12 billion a year, and growing at the dumbfounding rate of 50 per cent per annum. Unilever reaches for terms like 'economic tsunami' to describe the consequences. Judging by what I see out the window, Unilever is on to something.

GG is a white male, aged 39, with muscled forearms, bulging biceps and a square jaw topped off by a crew-cut. On the deceptive surface, he looks rather like a Boer cop from the apartheid era. This is not exactly a style associated with Soweto, but GG loves this place. He is jabbering like a cokehead about its glories. That there is The Back Room, a dance club owned by one of his buddies. The dam over yonder is where GG stages the annual 'Soweto Beach Party,' of which more later. This is the route followed by the Tour de Soweto, a GGorganised bicycle race that drew international attention two months ago.

And this is Pimville.

In the struggle years, my heart would sink into my boots as I turned into Pimville. It was less dangerous than other zones of Soweto, but you were still liable to encounter feral comrades who threw stones if they saw white skin in a passing car. Back then, Pimville was a sea of identical matchbox houses, all dusty and unpainted, marching over the horizon in all directions. Now it's a suburb. ‘

When apartheid ended, residents were given deeds to their houses, and with ownership came pride – trees, lawns, rose gardens, cars in every second driveway, every third house undergoing renovation. Here and there, the old apartheid matchboxes have been torn down entirely and replaced with double-storey monstrosities that resemble nothing so much as the houses Afrikaners built when apartheid first lifted them out of poor white squalor. ‘Ja,’ chuckles GG, ‘there’s no difference between the Boers and the Bantu. Wait till you see Mrs Phetlo’s house.’

Mrs Catherine Phetlo is in many respects your classic Black Diamond. Her husband made money in the transport business. She is a supermarket supervisor. In her living room, leather-upholstered sofas face a giant TV set. Her display cabinets are crammed with china, crystal glasses and pink porcelain ducks my middle-class mother would consider ‘nice.’ The walls are lined with photographs of children in mortar boards, and a brass plaque offers a Victorian platitude – ‘Bless this house, O Lord we pray, make it safe by night and day.’

The lady of the house is a matronly person who exemplifies the Black Diamond virtues. She is optimistic and resourceful, keeps an immaculate house, prides herself on her five children’s achievements and keeps up with the Joneses. That is



**Technically, his guns are about 100 years behind the times, but they are much in demand in this wild valley where maidens still go barebreasted and women crawl on all fours in the presence of kings**

why Mrs Phetlo has been selected to appear in a TV advertorial sponsored by Sunlight washing powder, a brand eager to win the Black Diamonds’ favour.

She woke up this morning to find a film crew in her driveway. They’re setting up gear, preparing for the shoot. Mrs Phetlo has gotten herself up for the occasion in a silky beige pants suit with gold accessories. Her neighbours, equally resplendent, have turned out in force to support her. One is adjusting her hem, another helping with make-up. A third is making tea. ‘This is why I will never move to the white suburbs,’ says Mrs Phetlo. ‘Things are not right there. There is no neighbouring.’ Her neighbours go, eh-heh. White suburbs are cold. Black people who move there get homesick and sad. One last touch of the powder puff, and Mrs Phetlo is ready. GG nods to a young man with a clipboard, who cries, ‘Action.’

The shooting of Mrs Phetlo gets underway, and GG and I step outside to smoke and catch up. ‘By the way,’ I ask, ‘have you got that Colt on you?’ He laughs and says, ‘Nah, I hardly ever carry a gun anymore. Soweto is safe these days.’

What a strange day this is turning out to be – Soweto booming, Black Diamonds turning up their noses at the white suburbs, GG telling me once-mean streets are now quite tame. Would you mind if I resurrect that painful old saw about Africa’s knack of always producing something new? Well, here it is. I should have seen it coming. Let’s dig up its roots and examine its nature.

IT’S THE WINTER OF 1986 AND I’M SITTING on a mountaintop overlooking the Tugela River, discussing the art of war with an ancient Zulu named Mankomaan Mabaso. Mabaso prefers to live here, three hours’walk from the nearest road,

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because his business is illegal. He has an anvil, a hand-cranked drill, a file and a pile of scrap metal that he fashions into homemade rifles. Technically, his guns are about two centuries behind the times, but they are much in demand in this wild valley where maidens still go barebreasted and women crawl on all fours in the presence of kings. Mabaso himself is a grand old savage. He has an old .303 hunting rifle secreted somewhere and is said to be deadly with it, capable of hitting an enemy from a thousand yards away. This makes him a man of distinction in the Thembu clan of the Zulu nation.

All Zulus enjoy in a warlike reputation, but the Thembu and their neighbours, the Mchunu, were arguably more warlike any other. Their territory was known as Msinga, and it was notorious for opaque feuds that sometimes boiled over into full-scale fratricidal warfare, with armies of warriors armed with spears, home-made rifles and the occasional machine gun hunting one another in the canyons and broken hills that lined the slow brown river. There were jets in Msinga's skies and buses crawling along its dusty roads, but in many respects, it was a place of the Iron Age. Women wore traditional regalia – purple cloaks, leather skirts, great coagulations of beads and bangles around wrists and ankles. Their husbands sported huge coloured discs in their earlobes. Everyone was poor and hungry. And everyone save the Alcocks was black.

Neil Alcock was a rural development worker who came to Msinga with dreams of turning a poverty-stricken apartheid dumping ground into a land of green and plenty. It turned out to be a greater challenge than he'd anticipated. Drought and war ruined his agricultural projects. His water-wheel was washed away in a flood.



**All Zulus enjoy a warlike reputation, but the Thembu and their neighbours, the Mchunu, were arguably more warlike than any other**

His white neighbours, outraged by his interference in their medieval labour practices, were constantly threatening to kill him. In the end, though, the bullet came from a different direction – he was caught in the crossfire while attempting to broker a truce between warring Thembu and Mchunu factions, and was murdered for his trouble.

I'd come to Msinga to talk to his widow, Creina, a strange and bewitching creature who spoke mostly in riddles. She conceded that she and her dead husband had largely failed in what they came to do in Msinga, and yet, there were tiny increments of progress. She said she'd recently seen a Zulu child building play-play soil-retaining walls on an eroding footpath. Saving the topsoil was an idea Neil had brought here, and it had taken root in the child's consciousness. It wasn't a big thing, but it was something.

Another thing Neil left behind was two teenaged sons, one of whom once asked his father what his future would be. 'I can't afford to send you to university,' said Neil, 'but I will prepare you for life in Africa.' Colonial Africa was full of whites who grew up playing with piccanins in farmyards, but there were only two who grew up in a mud hut, with no running water, no electricity, no TV, no lights, no windows even – just rafts of logs lowered against holes in the walls to keep out the winter cold. For the Alcock boys, hunting small game with their Zulu peers wasn't sport. They did it because they were hungry, like everyone else.

One cringes at the term 'white Zulu,' which has been much debased by urban fakers whose Zuluness consists largely of dreadlocks and tribal bangles. The Alcock boys were strangers to such self-indulgence. Their Zulu peers regarded them as Zulus, and when it came to the boyhood

ritual of stick-fighting, they were expected to stand and fight, never flinching in the face of blood and pain. They learned the Zulu warrior code – hammer anyone who messes with you – and the allied art of shooting straight. And they learned the Zulu language.

The Alcocks had the only phone for miles around. When Zulu migrant workers in distant cities needed to communicate with relatives, they would call to leave messages with the Alcocks. Sometimes they found themselves speaking to creatures whose Zulu was so immaculate that they refused to believe the person on the far end of the line was white. In South Africa, a handful of white farmers and policemen speak Zulu, but their accents betray their race. With the Alcock boys, you couldn't tell. Such a thing was unheard-of, and Mabaso found it unsettling. 'Those boys are dangerous,' he said.

He was laughing as he spoke. Indeed, one of the Alcock boys was sitting beside me, translating. Mabaso loved the Alcock boys, but still, the language thing was troubling. A Zulu could penetrate the white world more or less at will, provided he was willing to adopt an alias (John or Peter), learn a bit of English, and take a job as a house boy. But whites couldn't enter the Zulu world, because they were too arrogant to learn the language. This gave Zulus a huge strategic advantage in certain situations. You could stand a yard away from a white man and openly plot picking his pocket, so long as you spoke only Zulu. You could crack jokes about him, admire his wife's breasts, plan his overthrow, and he'd be totally clueless.

Ceding this advantage to anyone, even to boys he liked, did not appeal to Mabaso. But what could he do? The boys were there. They were growing big and tall, with unruly mops of blond hair. They



**You could stand a yard away from a white man and openly plot picking his pocket, so long as you spoke only Zulu. You could crack jokes about him, admire his wife's breasts, plan his overthrow, and he'd be totally clueless**

were squabbling with their mother, chasing girls and developing attitude. Soon they would finish school and go out into the world, armed with the only legacy their dead father could bestow on them: the skills to live in Africa.

One wonders if Neil Alcock understood the riches he was bequeathing. He began life as a commercial farmer, but got increasingly involved in liberal politics as apartheid blighted the lives of his Zulu neighbours. In the sixties, he became a sort of secular missionary, obsessed with the idea that hunger would be wiped out if African peasants could be taught to use their land effectively. Towards this end, he and Creina moved to Msinga, where they planned to live among Africans, like Africans, until such time as Africa's pain became their own. Only in this way, said Neil, could you earn the peasants' trust and begin to make progress.

The boys born into this insanely idealistic social experiment are now in their thirties. The younger was named Rauri, but Zulus called him Khonya. The other was GG. This is his story.

THE PALACE BAR IS LOCATED ON THE ground floor of a highrise in Randburg, a suburban business district just north of Johannesburg proper. Once upon a time, Randburg was strictly whites-only, but as apartheid crumbled the area was infiltrated by blacks who liked the low rents and made the Palace their watering hole. Initially, owner Lance Smith was thrilled to have the extra business, but as time passed, his white clientele vanished entirely, and Lance grew paranoid in his isolation. As he mounted the stairs to open his doors, he'd find dozens of black customers waiting to get their hands on a cold beer. Lance was sure it was just a matter of time before the blacks killed him, so he

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was ecstatic when a madman offered to take the business off his hands. GG spent his first several years out of school doing upliftment work in rural areas, but didn't like it much – too many limp-wristed pieties from the NGO types, no adventure, and above all, no money. Having grown up in a mud hut, GG did not find poverty glamorous. Most of his Zulu brethren shared this view and trekked to Johannesburg as soon as they were old enough, dreaming of smart clothes, fast cars and big money. In 1990 or thereabouts, GG gave up the struggle and joined them.

He worked on a construction site before linking up with businessmen who wanted to install manned phone booths in black areas. Elsewhere in the world, this would have been easy, but in those anarchic times, doing business in Johannesburg's townships was almost impossible. White-owned companies routinely had their vans stoned or burned, their employees robbed or shot. As a rule, white civilians never set foot in the townships. There were areas where even policemen were scared to venture, but the white boy from Msinga had seen worse. He cruised the city's hellholes in jeans and a T-shirt, setting up phone shops at the rate of two or three a day and installing tough Msinga homeboys to run them. The grateful businessmen gave him five per cent of the takings, and GG moved on to bigger things.

For a man accustomed to hellholes, Randburg held no terror at all. GG bought Lance out, repainted the place, put paper in the toilets and reopened it as The Palace of Kwaito. Again, his Msinga homeboys were a critical part of the operation. One is at pains to acknowledge that the Zulu nation has produced its share of poets, cowards and gentle intellectuals, but they do not feature in the great legend of Zulu militarism. In Jo'burg, a certain



**As a rule, white civilians never set foot in the townships. There were areas where even policemen were scared to venture, but the white boy from Msinga had seen worse**

kind of Zulu – especially a rural Zulu, and especially a rural Zulu from Msinga – is held to be very dangerous. You do not cross these guys. You do not even look at them askance. You view them as Romans viewed Asterix and Obelix, because they are presumed to be capable of beserkery when their blood is up.

There are a thousand yarns in this regard, but for the moment, one will suffice. The Palace of Kwaito's manager was Fana Dlada, a 22-year-old who'd grown up in a mud hut a few hundred yards from his own. Fana was definitely that certain kind of Zulu. One afternoon, he looked up from his newspaper to find four robbers levelling weapons at him. He dropped the paper and charged, bellowing frightening Zulu war cries. The robbers ran, one in such a state of terror that he broke an ankle leaping down a staircase. According to GG, Fana was sorely disappointed at this outcome. He hadn't had a scrap for ages, because locals were terrified of him. He thought the four-to-one odds would stiffen the robbers' resolve, but no such luck.

While Fana and his crew kept anti-social elements at bay, GG was holding down a day job with a company that owned a fleet of gailycoloured trucks whose appearance in rural villages would cause all normal activities to cease. Thousands would gather in the town square, whereupon staff would drop the sides of the truck, revealing a stage. The show that followed featured pop music, comedy sketches, morality playlets, beauty pageants and every now and then, a word from the sponsors, who ranged from soap manufacturers to Aids awareness campaigns.

GG started as a lowly organiser, but his unique African skills soon elevated him to a directorship in a company that was

turning over around R65 million a year. As such, he took it personally when gunmen started hijacking company trucks. ‘We went through a patch where we had 23 trucks hijacked in three months,’ he says. ‘We were being targeted by an organised crime syndicate that was threatening to murder our drivers if they refused to cooperate. We knew exactly who was doing this. Not the big guys – they had whites and Indians moving the vehicles out of the country – but the operators we knew. So we went to the police and said, what can we do? They said, get a court interdict. The criminals would have laughed at us. So we tried the politicians, but they had succumbed to white liberal weakness and said, “Be vigilant, not vigilante.” We thought okay, let them dream, this is our Africa.’

So I talked to these guys I grew up with – Fezela which means scorpion, and Dumisani which means thunder. They were famous for not taking shit. They organised four or five others and we went to the East Rand at three am. When we arrived at the first house, the guy wouldn’t open his door until he saw there was a white guy in the group. He thought I was a cop, so he said, “Wait, wait, I will open, I want to talk to the sergeant.”

‘He opens and says, “Sergeant, where is your search warrant?” I shove the barrel of my shotgun up his nose, and he realises he’s in trouble. Scorpion says, get out of the way, you don’t want brains on your clothes. Then he cocks his pistol and shoves it into this guy’s ear. The guy thinks he’s going to die. He starts peeing. Please, please please. We said, okay, take us to your boss and we’ll let you live. ‘It was like a Western, all these heavily armed okes walking down the road with our captive in front. We arrived at a nice house, surrounded it. They wouldn’t open the



**Scorpion says, get out of the way, you don’t want brains on your clothes. Then he cocks his pistol and shoves it into this guy’s ear. The guy thinks he’s going to die. He starts peeing**

door, so we shot out the lock. The owner comes out in his underpants, saying, “I don’t even know this guy.” We knew he was lying, but it was getting light and we were worried about the cops coming, so I gave them all a business card and said, “If you ever see this logo in a truck you hijack, we will come back and there will be a war like you have never seen before. You will all die.”

Later that week, Thunder and Scorpion visited several houses in Soweto, where they distributed more business cards and similar messages. The hijackings stopped immediately.

Meanwhile, in Msinga, Khonya Alcock was building himself a mud hut a few hundred yards downstream from his widowed mother’s. Khonya is the younger and some say gentler of the brothers, although I would dispute that assessment. Let’s just say Khonya is the more cerebral of the two, and seems to have inherited his parents’ indifference to worldly comforts. Like his mother, he reads avidly, and writes letters full of vivid descriptions and wise insights. Like his father, he’s interested in the land and the Zulu peasants who live on it.

The lot of those peasants changed radically after 1994, when Nelson Mandela’s government announced that land taken from blacks under discriminatory laws would be returned to its original owners. Zulus responded by laying claim to vast swathes of territory along their border with white South Africa. Their own land was barren and eroded, ruined by overgrazing. The white farms were verdant, and Zulu cattlemen couldn’t wait to drive their scrawny herds over the apartheid boundary. But first, there were disputes to settle. Some white farmers threatened to shoot anyone who tried to take their land away. Some Zulus claimed land to which

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they weren't entitled. In some instances, rival clans laid claim to the same farm and threatened violence if the prize was denied them.

The authorities were at a loss. How to control the process and quell the looming anarchy? They needed someone who could explain the Zulu position to white farmers, and vice versa. Someone willing to venture into remote areas where the locals were armed and sometimes dangerous. In short, they needed Khonya Alcock.

If this was a sentimental Hollywood movie, it would now evolve into a story of the good brother versus the bad, Khonya striving for racial justice in the heartland while the violence-prone GG pursues a variant of capitalist gang warfare in the distant and sinful city. Well, yes. The Alcock boys are indeed prone to rivalry. GG admires Mitsubishi off-road vehicles. Khonya feels the Toyota is more rugged. GG favours the Colt, whereas Khonya swears by the Glock. GG feels one owes criminals the courtesy of a warning shot, whereas Khonya jokes about 'two warning shots through the heart.'

On the page, this sounds rabidly racist, but in context, it's something else entirely. The Alcock boys are almost always surrounded by blacks who seem to enjoy their company hugely. The laugh, spar, crack jokes about you in a language you can't understand, then turn to you and say something outrageous, like, 'Hey Rian, we're just talking about the solution for crime. Two warning shots through the heart, hey. What do you say?' Everyone falls silent and watches your reaction. They find it particularly amusing if you turn red and start sputtering liberal nonsense about constitutional rights and due process.

This is about the only subject the Al-



**South Africa is a frontier state where the rules are still being written and the state is struggling to impose its progressive values on an unruly populace. What would you do if you lived here?**

cock boys agree on – the inanity of white liberals who think all Africans are humble Christians or kindly practitioners of ubuntu but flee the country as soon as anyone points a gun at them. Such liberals admire the results of Khonya's land reform work, but tend to be disconcerted by his methods. He drives into a dispute with his guns and his dogs, dazzles the opposing parties with his language skills and charms them into a deal. If that fails ... On one occasion, rival claimants started threatening to kill each other rather than compromise. Khonya slapped his Glock on the table and said, 'I'm the only armed man in this room.' By sunset, he had a signed settlement.

One imagines nostrils twitching in Hampstead as liberals digest this, but that's Hampstead for you. South Africa is a frontier state where the rules are still being written and the state is struggling to impose its progressive values on an unruly populace. What would you do if you lived here? Weep? Bow down before the hard men? Emigrate? The Alcock boys are made of sterner stuff. As far as I know, they've never actually shot anyone, but they exist in a world I can only liken to 1940s Hollywood westerns. The town has been taken over by evil men. Widows and orphans are suffering, but the good citizens are too timid to resist until a lone rider shows up to save them.

In the outside world, such men would be regarded as deranged fantasists, but here, they seem saner than most. 'They have their own moral universe that they almost chopped out of the rock they grew up in,' says Christine Hodges, a film editor who has known the boys for years. 'It is very hard-core but there is no black and white about it, excuse the pun. They never muddy things with doubts about moral worthiness and relative merit, be-

cause they've already decided that. They just do it.'

Do what, exactly? Over the past decade, Khonya has reclaimed an area half the size of Wales for landless people. His brother figures his labours have altered the lives of 200 000 Zulus, but Khonya is reluctant to claim credit. He just shrugs and says, 'Ah, change the subject.' GG owns a company called Minanawe (you and me) that does advertising and promotions in black communities, employing up to 500 people at peak periods. Both boys are married with children, and both concede the other's achievements, within limits.

'As far as I'm concerned,' says GG, 'the one with the most toys wins.' He lives in a ranch house in a suburb favoured by the black nouveau riche because Soweto is just ten minutes down the freeway. He owns a Mitsubishi pick-up, a VW Toureg, 1200 cc BMW motorcycle, a motor boat, sundry mountain bikes, several kayaks and a paraglider. Khonya lives in a modest Pietermaritzburg flat and might in crassly materialistic terms be judged a failure, but a far more profound assessment lurks hereabouts. Let's seek it.

CAN WE TALK ABOUT MARKET RESEARCH for a moment? One hears yawns, but South Africa is a country where research commissioned by soap powder firms often reveals truths that elude the daily papers. In the 1980s, for instance, journalism gave the impression that black South Africa was a seething hotbed of Marxist insurrection, four-square behind the then-Sovietist ANC. Market research told another story entirely, finding massive levels of admiration among urban blacks for all things American, including capitalism. The sole exception was a tiny segment of university-educated black women, who thought Maggie Thatcher's UK was the



**When the new dawn broke over SA, these cosmopoles turned their gaze on the black market, assuming that cool was a nonracial thing and that blacks were prey to exactly the same status cravings as whites.**

finest country on the planet.

Today, South African newspapers are full of stories about crime, unemployment and the decay of our electricity supply network, which is increasingly prone to plunge us into days-long blackouts. On bad days, you get the impression of a doomed nation, septic with despair. But market research reveals blinding optimism in places like Soweto. Upwards of 80 per cent of the black middle class feel life is great and getting better. They have money in their pockets, access to well-paid white-collar jobs. Some own cars, and take seaside holidays.

Johannesburg's advertising companies are naturally keen to talk to these people, but it is not easy. Advertising was traditionally a white industry, staffed by cosmopoles who took their cues from New York and London. When the new dawn broke over SA, these cosmopoles turned their gaze on the black market, assuming that cool was a nonracial thing and that blacks were prey to exactly the same status cravings as whites. The result was an epidemic of TV ads featuring slender African models with long straight hair and English accents, consorting with Armani-clad beaux in 'international' settings.

Blacks were not impressed. Indeed, the aforementioned Unilever research project found that two-thirds of Black Diamonds disliked the way they were portrayed in advertising. They did not want to see trendies mimicking whites. They wanted real Africans. 'People like us,' with African accents and African attitudes.

GG was delighted by the resulting consternation, because he'd been telling advertising agencies this for years. In fact, his career is built on rubbing white noses in white ignorance. 'There was a time when the agencies hated us,' he says, 'because we were always telling them their

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campaigns were absurd. They'd say, ah, rubbish, and commission research which would always confirm the answers we'd already given.'

We're driving around Soweto in bright sunshine, talking about market research and the light it sheds on the African female derrière. This is no small thing, pardon the pun. A certain sort of white South African has always maintained that black men love big butts, but you'd never see a big behind in advertising. 'Whiteys don't want to show large African women because they think it's a stereotype,' says GG. 'I've been telling them for ages that large African women are very happy with themselves. They don't need whitey's approval.'

This was precisely the sort of sentiment that advertisers found offensive, but research recently commissioned by Levi Strauss shows GG was right: African prejudice in favour of the ample derrière is real and widely held. African women are not ashamed of their large butts. On the contrary, they want skin-tight jeans that show them off to best advantage. Levi's obliged by introducing a brand called Eva, cut to suit African requirements, and laughed all the way to the bank.

Levi Strauss is not one of GG's clients, but this is the sort of thing he does for a living – tells First World companies who their African customers are and how to talk to them. A soup company hires him to find out why blacks wouldn't buy their minestrone. Answer: a strong cultural aversion to the mushrooms pictured on the package. Captain Morgan rum wants to sell its product to blacks but doesn't know how. GG says, well, your advertising is based on palm trees and Caribbean beaches, and black South Africans don't get it. But this can of course be changed.

Then he and his men dump 400 tons



**A certain sort of white South African has always maintained that black men love big butts, but you'd never see a big behind in advertising**

of white sand on the banks of a power station dam, moor eight ocean-going yachts offshore and invite Soweto's elite to a 'Soweto Beach Party,' which subsequently turns into an annual event. Last year, they had the nation's hottest pop stars on stage, 12 000 fans inside the fence, another 15 000 clamouring to get in. Traffic was gridlocked for five km in all directions. Captain Morgan was ecstatic.

We pull up outside a joint called Masakeng, a Sotho term for cattle kraal. In the bad old days, this would have been a shebeen, an illicit drinking spot, but now it's an upmarket entertainment venue frequented by Soweto's upper class. We are here to meet Billy Chaka, a dashing, dark-eyed playboy who quit a job in academe to become GG's partner. Billy drives an Audi 180 turbo, dates celebrities, and seems to know everyone. 'I work, he networks,' jokes GG. Billy recently lured Doctor Khumalo, the greatest striker in SA football history, to spearhead a soap powder promotion. Last year, every impresario in town was battling to book Kelly, a sexy pop tart who surged to megastardom when the tabloids revealed she was performing on stage without panties. Billy convinced her to headline the Beach Party.

Billy and GG have actually come to confer with Masakeng owner Sonwelo Mautloa about their next wild party, but today's newspapers feature a story that has aggravated them hugely. Foreigners are saying South Africa is too disorganised to stage the 2010 Soccer World Cup. Indeed, Australia is reportedly plotting to take our World Cup away on grounds that football fans will never set foot in a country so dangerous. 'Preposterous,' says Billy. 'Racist,' says GG. 'Completely uninformed crap.'

'Look,' says GG, 'nobody's denying that

there's crime, but we've repeatedly shown that we can run world-class events and make sure there's no shit.' Minanawe's last beach party drew 27 000 punters, most of whom were drunk. Video footage of the event shows thousands of half-naked bodies writhing in firelight while fireworks detonate in the sky and a dark human tide batters the perimeter fence, begging to be let in. And yet, thanks to 'strong local boys' doing the security, the event passed off with less aggro than an English folk festival; two fans cut themselves on broken glass, and some guy bit his girlfriend's face when he found her dancing with someone else.

Last March, GG and Billy pulled off a similar feat with the inaugural 'Tour de Soweto.' You must understand that cycling is a lily-white sport in South Africa, and that most whites view Soweto with terminal dread. At the outset, GG and Billy thought they'd be lucky to lure a few dozen white cyclists, but they formed an alliance with Soweto's taxi associations, who agreed to provide marshals. Soweto's taxi men are hard; nobody messes with them. When word of the arrangement got out, GG started getting tentative inquiries from nervous white cyclists. Will I be safe? Can women participate? Will police line the route? And so on. GG cajoled them into taking a chance, and on the day, two thousand showed up and had a wonderful time. The sun was bright, the roads great, crowds friendly and cheerful. A few punctures and traffic jams aside, there wasn't a single problem.

Perhaps the bosses of international soccer should talk to GG about the appropriate African response to crime. Towards sunset, he and I ran into Archie Sepoyo, chairman of the Soweto Cycling Association. Archie said some of his chums had recently fallen victim to muggers as they



**When the robber realises he's being followed, he stops and shoots. GG shoots back. The race resumes, but GG's losing because he's wearing clumsy cycling shoes**

rode across a stretch of open land. This prompted GG to tell a story about the day someone tried to rob him of his mountain bike on a lonely footpath north of Jo'burg.

'This guy shot at me from point blank range,' he says. 'I was so shocked I fell off and this guy takes off with my bike.' Interestingly, GG never carries a gun in Soweto, but he finds it advisable to pack a gat on the mostly white and supposedly safe side of town. He draws the Colt, fires a shot in the air. The robber abandons the bike and runs, but it is too late: he's reawakened the Zulu beserker in GG's corporate breast. GG screams, 'Someone is going to die today,' and gives chase.

When the robber realises he's being followed, he stops and shoots. GG shoots back. The race resumes, but GG's losing because he's wearing clumsy cycling shoes. Then two offroad motorbikes appear. The riders want nothing to do with this madness, but GG says, 'Just get me close,' so they give him a ride. Now they're gaining on the robber, who keeps turning to fire at them. The bikers are terrified, but GG urges them on.

'When he's maybe 50 metres away,' says GG, 'I jump off and aim. I'm waiting for him to turn and fire at me. As he starts turning, he sees I've got him covered. He drops the gun and says, "Sorry." I say, lie down. I go over, take his gun. It's still got one bullet in. I give it back to him and say, in Zulu, "Pick up the gun." He says, "No, you're going to kill me." I say, "Pick up the fucking gun!" The two whitey bikers get between us at this point, shouting, "Hey, no ways, 'bru, stand back, you can't just shoot this guy!" I wasn't really going to. I just wanted to scare him, but things are getting out of hand so I lower the Colt and say something very stupid. I say, "Don't worry, I'm a white liberal."'

## THOSE FABULOUS ALCOCK BOYS

Archie and I howl with laughter. GG says, 'I don't know what I meant.' Nor do we.

AND SO WE COME TO THE END OF THIS story and consider its moral. Some years ago, in Tanzania, I met an old Afrikaans lady who, in 1950 or thereabouts, committed the unforgivable sin of getting herself knocked up by a black lover. The trekboer community under Mt Kilimanjaro expelled her, and Tannie Katrien Odendaal spent the rest of her life as a peasant farmer, living in a mud hut with her African family and, when the occasion presented itself, making soap out of hippopotamus fat. Tannie Katrien was a mutant. The Model C schoolgirls who congregate at my local shopping centre are mutants too. They are black, but their English accents are entirely Rosebank, and as far as I can tell, their interests are as vacuously suburban as were mine at that age. The Alcock boys are of course mutating in the opposite direction.

It is hard to say where all this mutation is leading, although the trend seems generally promising. A century hence, historians might look back and identify the Alcock boys as primitive incarnations of a new African life-form. On the other hand, there might not be a posterity at all, so let's just say Neil Alcock's experiment has produced hybrids whose world is infinitely more interesting and optimistic than



**One of the ladies says, in Zulu, 'Look at the hair on this one's arms.**

**It's a baboon, I tell you.' Her friends titter**

the gloomy one I inhabit. For them, just visiting the supermarket can turn into an extraordinary experience.

Picture this: you're in a shopping mall in northern Jo'burg. African ladies man a line of tills. They're chatting in Zulu, assuming their white customers don't understand a word. A white man reaches the head of the queue, laden with groceries. One of the ladies says, in Zulu, 'Look at the hair on this one's arms. It's a baboon, I tell you.' Her friends titter. The white man says nothing. He's writing a cheque. He rips it out, hands it over. He says, 'Ever see a baboon write a cheque?'

The till lady freezes. She says, 'Oh God. Sorry, baas.' The white man laughs and says, '*Senge suki kwe mfene ngaya kuba-si?* – so I've gone from baboon to baas in a couple of seconds?' This is seriously weird; the skin is white, but the voice is African. The till lady shrieks, claps a hand over her mouth and runs to hide behind a pillar.

By now, the rest of the till ladies are convulsed with merriment, and the entire supermarket is paralysed. A supervisor appears, apologising profusely. GG says, 'I don't mind. I think it's funny.' The guilty till lady is coaxed back to her post and finishes the transaction amid gales of laughter and ribald Zulu banter. GG gathers his groceries and waves goodbye. As he leaves, they give him a standing ovation. – *The Observer, June 2007*

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