

## ***A Tale of Two (South African) Cities***

The thing that hit me first about Johannesburg was the razor wire. From the airport we were channelled into town by mile upon mile of high fences of criss-crossed glinting blades. Rolls of the evil stuff topped every wall, fence and even lined the riverbanks. After a while I started noticing the other security features: the electric fences that sometimes topped the razor wire, occasional watch towers adding to the Stalag Luft chic, the automatic chonk of the central locking when the car stops, the ‘armed response services’ placards on every property, the ubiquitous ‘Trellidoors’ barring every front and back door, and the ‘check in your guns here’ signs at the shopping malls. Getting to the hotel unscathed was almost an anticlimax. I had developed a perverse but genuine desire to see the threat against which these defences have been raised.

On the other side of the highway from the lavish hotels, the gated luxury compounds and the car porn palaces of Sandton lies the township of Alexandria, both areas testament to Paul Theroux’s theory that the attractiveness of a place is inversely proportional to the poetry of its name. The next day I bullied the nice Afrikaner lady who was looking after me to take me on a short detour into the township. I’d seen worse elsewhere, but she was incredulous that someone would sell fruit from a piece of hardboard on the ground or fix car tyres in the dust with crude levers and wrenches, yet indignant that ‘dey’ don’t pay rates for such prime business premises.

Sensing (and maybe a little riled by) my lack of shock, she then took me to the Central Business District, which felt to me just like any other (black) African city centre, apart from the occasional group of heavies hanging with comic book menace on street corners. However she quickly evaporated my supercilious attitude by describing the time she got carjacked. When her attacker held his gun to her head and cocked it, she thought that she had been shot. Strangely enough he thanked her politely for the car as he drove off.

Ludi, a young Afrikaner, explained to me over dinner that even such organised crime had a racial hierarchy – the young black males do the dirty work obtaining the merchandise, while their Indian and white

bosses organise the shipping and sales and cream off the bulk of the proceeds. Ludi sums up the Afrikaner dilemma. He feels that he is being unfairly blamed for the apartheid system developed long before he was born and now consigned to history, but doesn't want to let go of the privileges of his birth, and fears the long term direction of the ANC Government's Affirmative Action programme. He is not colour blind though. Wanting to lubricate our conversation further, he called over a smart young black man, thinking he was a waiter. The man turned and we saw he wasn't wearing the waiter's uniform. For a long tense moment Ludi back-pedalled, mortified that he had assumed a black guy in a restaurant must work there. Fortunately for Ludi, the man was the maitre d' and his embarrassment slipped away.

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Six hundred miles away in Cape Town, it was perfectly normal for white people to wait on black people in restaurants. There is no easy explanation for why it was so different; it just didn't seem to be an issue. However, despite the city's jolly seaside vibe and astonishing setting wrapped around the monolithic splendour of Table Mountain, it took days to get grim Jo'burg out of our system. While the armed response services still do good business here, the residents choose either razor wire or electric fencing (not both) and often neither.

Still, it is impossible not to stereotype. Due to simple demographics, any threat to our possessions or ourselves would come from young black males, with the glue sniffing street kids the main worry. This fact is exaggerated by our ignorance of differing cultural values. To take an example, given some spare time, black African men will often lie down anywhere, be it pavement or grass verge, for a short kip. To our western eyes, bodies sprawled on the ground mean the dispossessed, the desperate and the crazy.

When we started to overcome this ignorance, we walked far and wide, used the packed matatu buses, and at last had conversations with blacks and mixed race 'coloureds', the latter walking evidence of an historical integration between white and black. Divisions still exist. Hamilton, a coloured man (in South Africa the term has none of the offensive connotations it has elsewhere) told us that the blacks and coloureds refuse to support the national rugby team despite its

endorsement by Nelson Mandela. Appropriately enough the Springboks are hammered by the All Blacks a day or two later. Hamilton is unemployed and was gently hawking his services as a tour guide. There were many guys in his situation, often providing unofficial car parking services wearing fluorescent bibs in the hope of a tip. Afrikaners seem to find them a nuisance, but when we couldn't find a taxi late one night, we found the services of such a young man invaluable.

Back at our B&B, we had a long chat Brian, a very camp Afrikaner. I told him that I always seem to visit countries just after they have been through a remarkable change, so I can never judge before and after. Rubbish, Brian told me, you have seen South Africa under apartheid. You have been to Johannesburg.