

Short Story

BEFORE THE FAMILY FOREGATHERING

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Pen and ink drawing by MILES PELO

Already two weeks and still Malay Camp had not quite felt like home. Strange how one gets used to the rail road running mile after mile ahead of one, how one comes to associate this station with this sound, that tang, that smell, that touch of the air on your skin.

"Johnny, when are you going?" His mother's voice reached him from it seemed miles away and yet he felt that, despite the distance, he had to reply as if she were only a few feet from him.

"In good time, Mum."

"Didn't you hear me, Johnny. There's a train coming in. Go and meet your Aunt, it must be her."

"It is the Blue Train, Mummy, and Angelina certainly can't travel on it, even you should know that. The Orange Express may have a second class compartment, but the Blue Train is certainly 'White Only'."

"What is that, my child?"

"I said it is the Blue Train, mother, the Blue Train. Aunt Angelina cannot be on it." This time he shouted back in reply.

"How do you know?"

"It is three o'clock, Ma, and I haven't been a bedding boy for the last five years every Christmas holiday without getting to know the times of the

trains." He looked across from Malay Camp to the main station. That's all De Aar really is, he thought, just a big station.

De Aar - as the geography books would have it - an important junction lying in the heart of the great Karoo, linking the barren western coast of Namibia, the fertile South-Western Cape Peninsula and the hinterland of the entire South Africa with each other. Especially everywhere in racist South Africa with the Mother City.

Cape Town: mother of pity ...

"I say, Madam, I say, Madam, it is right here, Madam, luscious peaches, lovely guavas, ohenimuri apples, hey, moenie loer nie; if you peep you will weep; these are onions for bunions, golden delicious, sweet and here, lady, they're vicious!"

The eternal bustle of the Grand Parade on a Saturday. Here the stacks of merchandise, there are shelves upon shelves of books, brand new, second hand, paperbacks, comics, hardbacks, encyclopaedias - the lot; and in one corner the Salvation Army preacher, in another the politician inveigling against all and sundry, especially the governmental sundry up the Avenue which, according to the speaker, was up the wall, in the doldrums, in a mess and minding everybody's business - all in vain.

He remembered the first impact that this Grand Parade had had on him - oh, what was it, about five years ago now. He remembered still the vividness of his impression every week when he crossed the Parade on his way to the training college; how he would stop to check on the latest acquisitions of second hand books that the corner stall always had in abundant supply. But most of all, the sounds of voices on the Parade, down Lower Adderley Street, up Hanover Street.

"I say, ou Charlie man, did you see what is playing in the bioscope now?"

"No, man, but ou George saw it mos last night. He tells me it is a very good double future. The one piece is called The Hunchback of Not a Damn - it shows.... Oh, man, you know mos what a hunchback is. So the title of the stukkie tells you mos what it is about, of course it is about a hunchback but I don't know why it is called Not a Damn. Possibly he didn't care a damn whether he was a hunchback or not. But ou Charlie also say it is a good stukkie. I forget now what they call the other one, but it is a double future. The other isn't a drama; I think it is a cowboy piece, and then there is also the comic cuts and the serious. You know mos the serious is the Mark of Zorro, Episode II."

You walk up Hanover Street and you cannot help but admire and envy the skill of the young chaps who jump onto a speeding double-decker bus. They hold onto the handrail, swing around it as if it were a greased pole and they trained acrobats. Then they stand facing in the direction from which they came, and jump off the bus, which is still going at full speed. And in the meantime you continue your journey past Seven Steps - the seven steps to heaven in somebody's wall - inscribed de-

scription. A series of broken and breaking stone steps leading to the heart of District Six delapidation...

Seven Steps to heaven - the only kind of wall slogan allowed these days, and at the top of the seven steps a kind of heaven does await you. Someone with a *dagga-pilletjie*. (Kiss me, Marie Johanna) The second draw or third on the little rolled cigarette and probably the hungry, frustrated young *skollie* (*Weg wereld* - a whiff and a sniff and one gone is the world that call me a won't-work hooligan) who was climbing up the seven steps feels that he is seven steps further from the squalor of his own District Six. (Sweet sleep in the dreamy arms of Maria Juana ...)

One night and in the darkness of an alley-way in District Six a voice out of the deeper darkness of a doorway that was also a passage that was also a hallway and bedroom for five decrepit bodies:

"Hey, Lange!" Was it Lange they were shouting, tall one, meaning him and referring to his 6' 2" or ...

"Hey, Lange," a second voice insisted out of the doorway, "can't you hear we're calling you?" Were they saying Langa, which means the sun (and is the name of one of Cape Town's locations, the transit camps for African labour); referring to his dark complexion...

"Hey!"

"Me?"

"Yes you, give us half-a-crown, man. I mean, give us fifty cents or can you make it a round rand?"

"Sorry, palley, I haven't got any money, man. I am only just a student, you see."

"You a student? You are as big as a giant! *Voetsek*, what do you take me for? Do you think I'm wet behind the ears? Do you think I am a student? and here I am smaller than you? No man. Student, you a student, cor, g'wan, you're no scholar, you're a skollie. Just like me except you're a respectable skollie."

"I am sorry I have got no money."

"Give us a smoke then."

"Don't smoke."

And then he had started running because they had advanced menacingly out of the darkness: he had run pell-mell down the darkness of an unknown street and had heard them shouting after him. "Langa, go back to Langa: Langa, back to Langa!"

Langa, the sun. Langa - the township which for all its bleakness of aspect meant jazz, jazz such as you could only hear from the agony of enforced bachelordom, the uncertainty of whether a liquor raid would happen and the difficulty of knowing whether your pass would be removed tomorrow. Langa, the sun. He had not of course gone to Langa but to Athlone where he boarded, to Bonteheuwel, which some witty inhabitant had rechristened Beverly Hills. At least the hills part was a correct translation. The Beverly certainly was no description to fit the grey drab sameness of the



houses which pained the sight as one looked down the dull monotony of Fuschia Lane, Acacia Avenue, Oak Road or Geranium Street. Bonteheuvel: flat expanse of uniformity to accomodate a name which meant variegated hill; to accomodate the unpredictable and unclassified and almost indescribable mixture that went by the name of "Cape Coloured".

Johnny, there is another train coming".

"That's the mail from Joburg, Ma. Aunt Angelina couldn't possibly be on that; after all, Victoria

West is not..."

"Johnny, my child, don't you start argumentifying with me. Where did you pick up these bad manners? Since when do you want to teach your mother? I gave birth to you, my child. The good Lord knows that I brought you up properly. I don't want you to let me down before the whole family. These city ways that you picked up in Cape Town, get rid of them, my child. It's all these politics that they teach you there in that school instead of teaching you how to teach the children good man-

ners and obedience to the government and faith in the Lord and obeying the laws of the country and of God, and this bedding boy business of yours hasn't done you any good either. Shame on you, my child. Here I brought you up respectable; I sacrifice, my child, to make you a teacher, day after day, my child, on my knees I scrubbed the floors of the rich people to get enough money to buy you books and what do I get? My child who is a teacher demeans himself to become a bedding boy and he goes to Joburg and what does he do there! I'm sure he mixes with *tsotsis* and the shebeen queens and the law breakers. Remember who you are! Johnny Olifant, a respectable coloured teacher..."

Had their family name somewhere in the past been Ndlovu? Then...

How right she was in a way. In Johannesburg, during the one weekend that he was off duty when his train had gone further north, he had certainly not mixed with respectable Cape Coloured folk but with...

"Kaffer, waar's jou pas?" They had all frozen, dumb. "Ou Jan, jong, kom kyk hier. I've caught a whole gang."

The policeman's torch had flung an imprisonment circle around them and had illuminated his grinning face momentarily as he swung the torch towards his advancing mate; the latter was striding out with a wide grin, one hand clasping the bottle of Pepsi-Cola that he had just taken from the Indian cafe, the other on the butt of his revolver.

"They still got the swag, you know." And then pointing at Jonas Radebe he had indicated his music bag. "What is in there, Kaffer? Don't you speak a civilised language?"

Jonas was quiet. "I say, what is in there?" Jonas—quiet still, had started biting his lower lip until out of the blue Siphos had intervened.

"No, he is raw, my boss, he doesn't understand. We have got night passes my boss, you see we're musicians. In that bag he has got his sax."

The policeman guffawed. "What, my God, he carries his sex in the bag, let him take it out, let me see his sex."

"Yes, my boss," and turning to Jo, Siphos warned him in location slang not to be silly. "Space jou ntloko, 'n man se bra. Dis 'n square laanietjie, lomfana. So, cucumber, my man. Dis hy die, ser-sant." He slowly, as he spoke, brought out his instrument.

I had joined the fellows when they had gone to a blow in the Bantu Men's Social Centre; one thing had led to another. Jam after jam. Everybody had enjoyed it all and so of course here we were at 2 o'clock in the morning without night passes in the area where we shouldn't be. Siphos was right and Jo obliged.

"Oh I see," said the policeman, "you see Jan-nie, he has got a big sex, eh? But I understand now how you people make music, don't you? Right, then blow, blow, man."

The first few notes were off key.

"Where are your other instruments? Why do you blow so hard man?" Hastily each of the other chaps had produced trumpets, a clarinet, and even the percussions had to be unpacked. "And where is yours, then?" and he pointed towards me.

I was about to explain that I was a bedding boy and that I had only accompanied the musicians, but Themba had thought much faster than I, and was ready with the information that I was....

"The lead singer, my basie, that's what he is, that's why he hasn't got an instrument. He does the singing and dancing for our group." And Themba's grin was the widest whitest spread that you could imagine ingratiating itself on anybody. And I had been obliged to sing and dance in the middle of Eloff Street. The dark but very respectable blocks of offices must have been amazed to see the natural rhythm and sense of movement of the native developed so inelegantly that night on the warm macadamised surface of the brightly lit, forsaken thoroughfare. I do not know to this day whether the policeman's laughter, uncontrolled gust after gust of belly laughter, was caused by my doing the *khwela* and the *phatha-phatha* solo and with such lack of subtlety in my own style, making up pseudo-suggestive gestures what was lacking in choreography, or by the completely unmusical croaking that passes for my singing voice, or by his sense of having achieved his objective, but he laughed, and laughed. Long and uncontrollably.

"And I thought this was a gang, what a band you chaps are. Now see that you don't walk about in the streets again this time of the night, you might get into trouble, you know. Thank your lucky stars that there are still police around to protect you. Now go. Laat vat, bliksems!"

And we let ourselves take the road like lightning, like trained athletes, like greased lightning in a big hurry to earth itself at home.

Now, the Olifant home would soon have its contingent of Christmas foregatherers here in De Aar for the last time, for granny was now *oorle* Ouma, late gran, and with her death the annual focus of the scattered Olifant clan was gone.

"Johnny!"

"Yes, Ma, I can hear it. It is Aunt Angelina's train. I'm going."

GLOSSARY

hey, moenie loer nie = don't peep; stukkie = piece; dagga-pilletjie = a joint of marijuana; skollie = thug; voetsek = (vulgar) go away, used to admonish dogs; Space jou ntloko, 'n man se bra. Dis a square laanietjie lomfana, so, cucumber, my man. Dis hy dieser-sant. (Get your act together my brother, this white boy is a square, so play it cool.