

After the Cages, the Jungle

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[A D R I A A N V A N D I S]

The train journey between Cape Town and Stellenbosch is full of adventure. Almost every day gangs of youths get on and rob the passengers between stations. I took that train. Deliberately. With a hundred rand of mug money in my trouser pocket. You mustn't disappoint thieves. I had bought a first-class ticket, I could always move down a class. Before we left, my compartment was swept by a slow, fat cleaner. She pulled a stick from under a seat and gave it to me. Take care, she said. It was a sturdy stick, hip-high, with vicious sharp points in the bark where side-shoots had been lopped off. I held it like a sabre and began my journey. Hundreds of passengers passed my window, nobody got in with me. I didn't like that at all. Two stations further on I moved to the overcrowded second class – to be less vulnerable. I was the only white man; probably the only one on the whole train.

Some tattooed youths got on. Unsavoury types with numbers on their arms – 26 and 28. Adornments that suggested they were members of The Numbers, a Cape prison gang that the newspapers are full of. Those who bear such a number are showing the outside world that crime is their vocation – the tattoos are a contract of eternal loyalty. The boys were accompanied by pretty girls. They looked contemptuously at my stick but didn't do anything. Perhaps the tattoos were a bluff, or they were restraining themselves because of the girls. Not a single passenger was robbed in the hour and a half between Cape Town and Stellenbosch.

Good luck for my fellow passengers. A pity for me. As a writer you want to experience something. But the journey and the tension were inspiration enough for the research I was carrying out for my next novel, which is set in South Africa. What else inspired me was the memories of earlier trips on the same route. In the autumn of 1973 I was studying in Stellenbosch. White and black still travelled separately then. In those days the stations were a lot cleaner than now, with no graffiti, and it was safer – for a white man. Sometimes carriages full of black people went past and we journeyed window to window – very slowly. We could look in at each other. I shall never forget the eyes of those black people. I saw contempt in their eyes. Hatred. But perhaps it was just envy or amazement, or the empty gaze of tired people. Eyes can be deceptive.



Nowadays, though, you would have to be blind not to see that South Africa is an extremely violent society. Blood splashes your face as you read the morning paper. The blood of a schoolboy who didn't want to hand over his mobile phone and got a bullet through his head. The blood of a three-year old whose balls were cut off because a superstitious business man needed the scrotum as a ritual sacrifice for his witch doctor – murder to ensure a successful business deal. The blood of a student killed by nine stab wounds in a park in broad daylight – just for the sake of it. The blood that flows in the taxi wars. The blood of thousands of raped women and men. Yes, reading the newspaper in South Africa takes a strong stomach.

Photo by George Hugo.

If the murders get too much for you, you can always amuse yourself with stories about leaders who steal, cheat, manipulate the machinery of the state and bribe judges. You can even become president doing that.

And what about the headteacher who sold drugs to his pupils? Or the story of the schoolgirl who fell into the hands of a gang of youths on her way home and was raped by them? After a week, when the gang let her go and the dazed victim reported to a police station, a policeman let her lie down in a cell. But she didn't get much sleep - she was bugged repeatedly that night by policemen and guards.

Photo by George Hugo.



In the first fragile fifteen years of South African democracy it has been fear, more than anything, that has been democratised. On the train, on the public highway, in large city centres ... *Everyone* is afraid now – rich and poor, whatever their colour, although I am aware that it is mainly the whites who complain, along with the impoverished blacks who live in the most vulnerable areas.

Why do I put the emphasis on all that fear and violence? To shock? I could mention positive developments. I report it because there is a racist undertone to all those appalling stories – and I notice that tone in myself, too. Didn't we secretly expect that the transition from apartheid to freedom would be one of bloodletting and disaster? And there you are – things are not going well!

In fact, weren't things better before? You can ask this kind of politically incorrect question out loud now. You don't hear anything else – in the Netherlands, and amongst the whites in South Africa. Very soon the popular politically incorrect will be politically correct again.

Nobody in his right mind wants to go back to the days of pass laws and a voiceless majority. The material wealth of the black population has visibly increased – even though the unemployment rate is still over thirty percent.

The cause of equal rights in South Africa has involved a lot of suffering. But not to bring corrupt leaders to power, surely? Or to discriminate against minorities? Those are the bitter questions that white and brown and black now ask themselves. Though the first generation of black administrators was well-educated, the demand for senior officials has increased so explosively that the poorly educated increasingly float to the top. And how. One third of those elected to local councils have difficulty reading and writing.

The country is in a period of transition – transition from an unfree to a free society, and in the process the limits of decency are being brazenly tested. South Africa faces a risky future. New populist leaders have emerged who, as they do elsewhere, exploit the fear of what many feel to be a too-rapidly-changing world by appealing to traditionalist and fundamentalist sentiments. In the meantime the gigantic social problems just keep on growing. Nobody knows which way South Africa will go. Downhill is a real possibility.

The heart of the rot is in South African politics, in particular, in a liberation movement that is finding it hard to become a party in government. Examples of favouritism and corruption in the ANC are legion. That, too, is part of the transition.

But even if there are holes in the roads because the councillors responsible have lined their own pockets with the money for maintenance and repair, even if ministers as thick as two short planks are being appointed, even if corrupt party members protect each other ... as a South African citizen you can still opt for improvement. The population is free. Free to accept decline. Free to fight it.

Once again people in South Africa are resisting a ruling party. Writers and leading intellectuals who raised their voices in the old days are in opposition again. Even louder is the chorus of critical black thinkers, unions and social organisations like the Treatment Action Campaign. It is a hopeful sign that the South African media reports extensively on wrongdoing in their own country. And if that becomes impossible, because the government forbids bad news, then it will be up to us to fight that censorship.

To hell with keeping our distance. This is no place for cynical detachment – which is so fashionable in the Netherlands at the moment. This is a time for

Photo by George Hugo.



support and vigilance. Commitment! Even if it is pure luxury for us. All the more reason. For historical reasons the Netherlands has always had strong links with South Africa. From pro-Afrikaner during the Boer wars to anti-Afrikaner during apartheid. Now the country really has become part of Africa we should not just drop it – especially because there is so much of Africa in our Western society.

Globalisation has made the world smaller, and at the same time increased mutual dependence. North and South meet each other more and more frequently at the negotiating table. South Africa is a social laboratory full of processes that are taking place in Europe as well. Our great European capitals are visibly changing colour. Other cultures are becoming prominent, other ideas about justice, religion and beauty. Stressful debates await us. This is *not* a time to look the other way. It is a powerful time. You can, of course, take refuge in resignation, indifference and despair; but as far as I am concerned there is only one option – to get involved. ■