

Reflections from Zimbabwe (1982-1988)



A few Rhodie Lifts

When I first arrived in Zimbabwe in Jan. 1982, nearly half the pedestrians passing along the 1st St. mall in Salisbury (soon to be Harare) were white. Most of the shops in the core of downtown appeared to be run by whites and whites still seemed to predominate the staffing of banks and government offices. Yet by the end of that same year, whites in the capital were thin on the ground: many having “taken the gap” to South Africa.

Once exceeding 5% of the total population of Rhodesia, by the mid-1980s whites comprised less than 1% of Zimbabweans. The shrinking core that remained included the wealthy (still working out schemes for transferring their assets) a few “liberals” and probably the most hapless.

Still, in the rich high veld beyond the towns—white farmers were to enjoy a few more years of prosperity. It would be two decades before this last bulwark of old Rhodesia was roughly shaken loose. By the time of the anarchic farm seizures in 2000-2002, Zimbabwe would become one of the world’s most wretched economic basket-cases...

Back in the early 1980s, when Zimbabwe was still only a slightly tarnished “pearl of Africa”—and I privileged to teach in a few of its well-run mission schools—I had little contact with white Zimbabweans. I usually passed them on the city street without eye contact and tended to avoid their watering holes. White drivers who passed me hitchhiking back to my mission school, would often scowl. That reaction I interpreted as contempt for expats assumed to ingratiating themselves with the new regime while being utterly naïve about the unfolding ‘disaster’ of African rule...

Still, when picked up by a 'Rhodie' (as we sojourners called them) I usually found them cordial and generous. They always waved away the offer to pay for a lift and sometimes offered a drink or a snack in transit. Even though their generosity was probably a holdover of the racial solidarity of an earlier era, I was always a grateful passenger. Also under the circumstances—I was not inclined to challenge their bursts of vitriol:

Out on the road heading north to Harare, I was lucky to flag down a Citroen pulling a trailer.

My ride, all the way to Harare, was with an old white land surveyor. He generously offered me a beer and regaled me for upwards of three hours with typical Rhodesian diatribes.

He told me of his World War II experiences in North Africa ("Rommel was a gentleman!") and expressed the standard Rhodesian bitterness that Britain, the country he fought for, sold '*brave little Rhodesia*' down the river.

With a Lion lager between my knees, I was careful not to arouse his suspicion. At one point I even agreed that it was shocking that some 'comrades' in the bush war were now government officials. My use of the word '*savage*' in describing the terrorization of villagers brought a faint smile to his lips.

"...And they say *we* treated *them* badly," he swiped his lips, "Europeans don't know what 'savage' is."

When we passed a construction crew working on a pylon tower, he scoffed.

"Now you tell the *kaffir* that he's got such and such a field to plow, or such and such a trench to dig today—and tell him when he's finished, he'll get so many shillings and go home—he understands that. But give him a monthly salary and he'll just sit in his office and wait for his salary at the end of the month... That government crew will take three weeks to construct that tower. My boys could do three towers in a month. Pay for piece work is more suited to the *kaffir* mentality—not a monthly salary."

He went on to tell me of his "six damn good years building electrical pylons up in Tanganyika" before independence.

He joked of how the "bloody *Maasai*" would pull out the brass nails from the base of his pylons to wear as earrings—a practice the Germans would never have tolerated.

"The Germans would not put up with even petty theft in their time. If a *kaffir* tried to steal nails from a public installation you'd have their bloody hands cut off... They knew the *kaffir* mentality," he boomed, "and the long and short of it is that the Germans were the only ones who did anything good for Tanganyika."

So much for the tender-minded view of human nature!

1983, January

Hitch-hiking back to Gokomere from Harare, I was picked up on the outskirts of Harare by a leathery Boer in a half-ton truck who dropped me off on the main road before turning in to the white farming district of Eckledoorn:

"I know I shouldn't say this, but these bloody African savages— the lot of them – are not capable of learning anything. Oh, I don't mind all the big boys: there are some decent chaps there... What's his name that fellow who's the new Minister of Finance? Chidzero? Think he studied in your country, Canada, that one. He's civilized..."

"Me and *my* workers get along just fine. Why just last week, a munt told me about a day during the war he visited the farm and where he had his AK-47 parked. We had a good laugh about that!

It's only these bloody comrades at the local government level— these munts that never went to the bush at all that make all the trouble. Like this district agricultural officer we have here..."

I was curious to know more but we had already reached the Eckledoorn turnoff.

1983, February

"The African is a natural thief," said the grizzled Rhodesian farmer behind the wheel of his Isuzu pick up truck, wiggling his brown walrus mustache. He touched his trilby bush hat.

"You know I've been twenty-two years in Africa. fourteen years in the Shaba district of Zaire before coming down here. I still like the simple African— his values are grassroots. You know what I mean? It's the educated ones I can't stand..."

"... What do I mean by a 'thief'? Well, you know it's not in the African tradition to work too hard, to produce a surplus. Before the coming of the white man, the African grew about as much food as he needed, and that's it. When he wanted something extra – he went on a raiding party. The next village— the tribe further down the bush. They've been at it for a few centuries. They brag about it!"

"... I lost four sheep last month to bloody *kaffir* dogs. Do you think the government wants to hear about it? Not a bloody chance – they'll stand right behind the thieves. We're on our own now. Where do you want out, mate?"

I handed him \$1— the standard fare charged as contribution to petrol.

“Petrol? No, no— don’t worry about it, mate... Cheers!”

Stepping out of his truck at the Total garage in Masvingo, it occurred that this friendly and generous fellow might well have been the notorious Mr. Norman who poisoned the dog of the father of my helper, Angela.

1983, March

After less than fifteen minutes by the roadside outside the Gokomere Mission gate, I caught a lift with one Mr. Alastair P., a craggy-faced Rhodie in a white Peugeot. For the first fifty kilometers, he was tightlipped and brusque but as we passed through those long stretches of road before Chivu, he began opening up:

He told me he was one of the last white CIOs (Central Intelligence Officers) currently working in government who had served under the former regime. Along with a general scathing of economic mismanagement, he complained about the unnecessary petrol price hike and the costly importation of expatriate expertise after qualified white Zimbabweans were driven away. On a more personal level, he expressed his bitterness for being passed over for promotion after twenty-three years in the service:

"When we see the rapid promotion to top positions of former criminals sprung out of jail, it really makes it hard for those of us who want to try to stay and make the best of it."

He offered a juicy anecdote of his personal investigation a few years ago of the wildly controversial Minister of Home Affairs, Comrade Ushewokenze, his current boss. He claimed that Comrade Ushewokenze he had been involved in a ritual murder case. According to Mr. P., Comrade Ushewokenze, as the chairman of the traditional Healers Association, had murky connections to disappearances and possible ritualistic attacks on his enemies. To top it off, the Minister of Home Affairs was apparently also a morphine addict.

Still, despite his frustrations, the Rhodie CIO spoke of his commitment to fight against the odds and stay on:

“Let them quote Chairman Mao's little red book as much as they please," he said. "I'm willing to work for any new administration in this country provided my experience and my knowledge of the profession is respected. There's still hope for a decent life here as long as a large number of whites hang on— the more who leave the tougher it will be for those of us who stay behind... And we're not fools either! It's plain enough that they want to push us out. When Mugabe makes a radical speech in Bulgaria or wherever— he surely doesn't think that it won't get back to us? But let them talk whatever they please. I'll put up with anything. It's only sheer stupidity and bungling inefficiency that I can't tolerate.”

Still, he expressed a sliver of hope:

“When the world recession bottoms out— maybe things will pick up here. We’ve still got potential— the minerals, the tea and the tobacco.”

Yet as we neared Harare, he ended our chat on a sad note: "You know Harare must have one of the nicest climates in the whole world. If things do get bloody intolerable here I can’t imagine how much I’ll miss this land itself. I was born here and have lived no where else..."

Staring straight ahead, he grimly nodded as I thanked him before closing the passenger door.

1983, April (Masvingo)

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Shifting loyalties at the Jacaranda

Throughout the sordid history of racial relations in the United States, the slightest resemblance of African ancestry determined one to be 'black'. While it was whites within a slave economy who imposed the definition of 'race' in America—ironically, African American themselves came to embrace it...

Quite in contrast to America's unwritten 'one-drop' designation of blackness—in Southern Africa, the slightest 'European' ancestry relegated one to the status of 'coloured.' Prior to Zimbabwean independence in 1980, the advantages of being identified as 'coloured' as opposed to being identified as African were clear:

'Coloureds' were allowed into certain bars and restaurants where 'right of admission reserved' forbade black Africans to enter. 'Coloureds' could also own property in some of the same middle class neighbourhoods as whites. Along with Asians, most 'coloured' Rhodesians were on the voting rolls in the UDI period when the black majority was denied the vote. Many of the same voters reliably supported the white-minority Ian Smith regime.

Still, the situation of 'coloureds' in Rhodesia was both delicate and complicated. While they were granted 'privileges' denied to the black population, they had no illusions about the rationale of the ruling minority in elevating mixed-race people to a higher social status than black Africans. Even with their 'almost white' status, few 'coloureds' socialized with white Rhodesians, lived in their posh suburbs or were admitted to their clubs. Yet the tiny white population could not supply the number of tradesman and urbanized managers that the developing economy required. Then with the onset of the bush war, the besieged state needed military recruits. So it was that men of mixed race—along with whites—were subject to the draft.

Fundamentally, the besieged white minority of Rhodesia desperately needed allies and mixed-race people uneasily fulfilled that need... At the same time, in contrast to the situation of 'coloureds' of South Africa—the identity of the 'coloured' population of Rhodesia (never exceeding more than about .5% of the total population) was ambiguous and fragile...

The following incidents (which prompted journal entries on the morning after) eerily confirmed insights about colonial race relations gleaned from Franz Fanon's "Black White Masks". While Fanon wrote of the desperation of Creole women in Martinique in the 1940s to identify as white and pursue white men—he could well have been describing the woman who introduced herself as Ursula.

Our brief encounter was in the Jacaranda bar of the International Hotel (just a block from the Zimbabwe parliament building) in 1982. The ugly language is uncensored:

1

I was hunched over the bar, picking lint from my pocket when out of the smoke-hazy din of the Jacaranda bar, an obese 'coloured' woman stepped uncertainly before me.

"Excuse me, you're a teacher, aren't you?" She touched my shoulder and sat on the stool next to me, the green tent of her dress billowing out around her.

I nodded to the chalk-dusted coins on the counter. "Yeah, guess I am."

"Would you like to join me and my friends?" She grinned and turned aside revealing a scar jagging her right cheek.

"Not really, I'm just about to head out to a movie."

The full bottle of beer just slid before me belied that I was in a hurry.

"I'd *love* to go to the movies with you honey," she gushed, "but at 7:30 I've got to go to a christening at my auntie's. Do you have the time, love?"

Just as I held up my wrist, 2 men closed in from the right.

"This is Leonard and that's Doug," she said.

A coffee-skinned man held his Castle Pilsner aloft in greeting. His partner, a coloured man in bulging white tee shirt swayed up behind, his bearish head lolling.

"I'm Ursula", chirped the woman, pushing back with a pudgy hand a strand of straight brownish hair. "And you are? Sorry, darling, I didn't catch your name."

"I'm Stanley," I lied, gritting teeth with the irritation of her fingers my knee.

"You look like you needed company." Ursula purred, "I'm *enchanted* to meet you!"

"Well, honestly, I was just—"

"Hey, man!" growled Doug, "where you *from* man?"

Breaking free from Leonard's arm, Doug dropped heavily, 2 stools down. For his part Leonard gave a mock salute and wheeled off. Doug lifted his head scowling.

"I'm, um, living out near Norton," I said.

"Out near the *farming* district?" asked Ursula, "but you aren't a *farmer* are you, darling?" The chain on her wrist jangled over a blurry bluish tattoo.

"I'm from North America," I mumbled staring away.

"I *knew* you were American, man," growled Doug widening yellowish eyes. "I could tell your accent. So how's Michael Jackson, man?" Dropping his head into his arms, he hummed a few wobbly notes of *'Thriller.'*

"I *adore* American music," said Ursula with a glance towards Doug, "At home I have *so* many discs— hey, do you like black girls?"

"What?" I jarred as her fingers roughly withdrawn from my knee, pointed to the corner.

"You keep staring at that kaffir girl, over there," she said in a hint of venom.

I looked away from a lithe woman in blue-beaded braids chatting in the corner and took a swig of warmish beer.

"I would *never*-" said Ursula emphasizing a Rhodie accent—" *ever* sleep with a black."

Nervously I chuckled. "Who said anything about sleeping with anyone?"

Ursula folded her big arms. "I might be coloured—but I'm *Rhodesian*. I was born in Rhodesia and I'm *proud* of it."

Doug, half asleep, offered an exclamatory snort.

"Just a drunkard!" Ursula leaned forward, loudly whispering, "An ex-soldier. I *really* didn't want to sit with him, you know. I was just being polite."

Again her hand was on my knee.

"I was *raised* to be polite, you know..." She leaned closer and half-whispered. "Not like these bloody '*bobojans*'!" [baboons]

I glanced into the crowd. Mercifully, the din was drowning out her voice.

Hand off my knee again, she leaned back and fished into her white vanity-bag for a cigarette. With a tsk, she rolled her eyes back towards the din. "You know, I've always thought of them as servants, really. Just tea-boys and domestics." Pulling out a Kingsgate from her pack, she paused, expecting a light. Unperturbed by the lack of gentlemanly response, she lit up herself and blew out a long drag. "I'm used to having servants, you know. When I was a child we always had servants, but you know we never *mixed* with Africans— it just wasn't done."

I swung round as a white-jacketed waiter, smiling broadly, stepped forth gesturing with his broom,

"Go ahead," said Ursula shaking her bracelet behind her head, "Do your sweeping, man."

With a frown the old man made perfunctory stabs under her stool.

"Thanks *baba*," I smiled nervously.

"*Mzita, baba*," he smiled back.

"*Danke*," Ursula offered in Afrikaans as the waiter moved on.

"You don't speak Shona?" I asked, mildly curious.

Not a word!" she said, exhaling through her nose. "At school we had a choice between French and Afrikaans. I studied Afrikaans."

"Well, you must have learned a little Shona," I teased, "You did say you were born here."

"I was born in Bulawayo," she corrected.

"Then you must speak some Ndebele."

"I *told* you!" she said taking the bait, "We didn't mix at all with the Africans."

Again her fingers were wavering across my knee. "I have nightmares," she shuddered, "nightmares of being raped by a black man." After a fierce drag she mashed out her cigarette. "It's what every 'nig-nog' has in mind, you know. They think it's a natural right for a man to rape a woman."

I glanced across the room as the soft-eyed Rasta-beaded girl rose, patted her blue-jeaned derriere and walked a little unsteadily on high-heels towards the ladies' room.

"I don't know," said Ursula catching my eye ruefully, "maybe it's just because I was born here— but I'll *never* get used to the idea of equality."

Tempted to ask about the scar on her cheek, instead I blurted: "It must be really tough for you living under a black government."

Abruptly, the fat hand was off my knee. "This government is really *stupid*, you know. Look at them!" Her upper arm jiggled as she gestures backwards towards the tables of animated men in business suits and natty safari jackets. "They think they're educated. Half of them here are probably government ministers."

Again, I cringed until she lowered her voice, " But what are they, really? Just a dirty bunch of ex-comrades, out with their *sluts* getting *pissed*!" Her nostrils flared. "Get a few drinks into them, they're all the same: '*bobojans*'!"

Suddenly the bar-door thudded open to emit a lanky blonde bearded fellow. She looked hopefully toward him. Probably a tourist, the blonde fellow stood awkwardly scanning the scene. Spotting the near comatose Doug, the tourist backed out the swinging door.

"I don't care really," Ursula smiled wistfully towards the door, "I'm not going to stay here much longer, anyway. I'm going to South Africa."

"South Africa? You honestly think things will be any easier down there?"

She touched her scar meditatively and looked over at Doug, whose lips were moving against the bar top.

"Dear, do you happen to have the time again?" she chirped "I left my watch at my cousin's place in Highlands. Actually, I'm supposed to be there early to help with the *braai*. Loudly she enunciated. "We're having a christening for my little nephew."

"You're a Christian, are you?" I said, suddenly a little nauseous from 3 warmish beers gulped in the unseasonable stickiness.

"I'm a Portuguese Catholic," said Ursula briskly. "What time did you say?"

"About, um, 7:15 PM. I'm just about to head off to my movie."

"Listen, could you do me a favour, darling?" The hand plumped back on my knee. "What time does this bar close?"

"I have no idea," I shook my watch, "I know I'm leaving in about 5 minutes."

Ursula poked her pudgy fingers into her vanity and sighed. "I was stupid, darling—going out with my wrong purse tonight. I don't even have a dollar with me."

As she dumped upon the counter the contents of her vanity, a few silver coins rolled forth. I looked away.

"If you could just lend me \$5, darling— just until 10 o'clock."

"What?"

"After my nephew's christening— after your movie— you can meet me here. I'll have your \$5. The fingers tightened on my leg.

"Sorry," I looked back towards the old barman carefully drying glasses. "I only have enough cash for the movie."

Before re-stuffed her purse she dragged the few coins from the counter into her free hand "I *should* have a dollar's change here," she murmured. "Listen, a taxi to Highlands from here shouldn't cost \$5? Maybe just \$3 would be enough."

In a twinge of pity, I dug into my breast pocket and tossed a folded blue note onto the counter. "Here's \$2."

"Thanks, darling," she said her voice rising, "I'll be back before 10 o'clock. Don't be late!"

Embarrassed, I glanced round as a bearded young man in wire rims and 3-piece suit suspiciously returned my look. If he were a CIO agent, then he would certainly have had an earful.

Ciao!" says Ursula, blowing back a kiss as she waddled out through the fetid roar. In a pang of pity it struck that the strategies that had served certain women in hustling though Rhodesia have become all but suicidal in independent Zimbabwe.

"Another Lion, *baas*?" With a Cream-Of-Wheat Man smile, the white-haired barman nodded towards my empty bottle.

"Not for me comrade," Executing a comic salute, I reached into my shoulder bag for a scrap of paper. Looking round vacantly I pulled out a ballpoint and smoothed out a ragged sheet of foolscap on the counter. On it, I scribbled: '*Black Skins White Masks*'? *Reread Franz Fanon!*' Stuffing the paper scrap into my pocket, I rose just as the reposing Doug, stirred with a sudden snort.

"Michael Jackson, man," he blubbered, his lips still touching the bar top, "Charles Bronson, Batman... Superman!"

1982, Harare

Another telling incident occurred at the Jacaranda bar just 8 months later. Given that the former Salisbury had by that time fully transitioned into Harare, it was not a surprise that the new order would be manifested in both shifting identities— and in shifting loyalties— of those on the margins:

2

Last night during Happy Hour in the Jacaranda, I ran into fellow Canuck, Evan, who teaches at the mission school that is the *alma mater* of Comrade Mugabe himself.

After just 18 months he can already get by in Shona and has stories of navigating the dodgy clubs of Harare accompanying his Zimbabwean buddy, a 'coloured' hospital

orderly. From a town in the prairies and only in his mid-20s, Evan is of the type of expat who in colonial days might have been described as “going native.”

Several drinks ahead of me, he described some of “the craziness” that has been stalking him lately:

“Man, there’s been too much bad craziness in my life,” he said, touching the peak of his Montréal Expos baseball cap. “I’m gettin’ tired of it!”

He then described an assault and rape charge against one of his Shona friends leveled by a French-Canadian fellow teacher recently posted at his school. According to Evan, an investigation launched by the “overreacting” Canadian Field Staff officer produced no hard evidence of any assault. Meanwhile Evan, who has made such an effort establishing good relations with the locals, was left to suffer the bad vibes of white perfidy.

"Just because of this crazy bitch I've lost my best friends out there," he bemoaned. "She's psychotic. She has a victim complex. She claims she's been raped 3 times before. All this bad craziness: why me?"

He went on to describe his “near murder” in Harare a couple of months ago. He said it occurred after a *ménage à trois* he had with a young Zambian woman and her Shona lesbian lover. “Jealousy-crazed,” the older woman apparently attacked Evan with a ceremonial axe.

“She was still swingin’ at me when I shut the door hoppin’ in only one leg of my pants!”

Possibly enticed by my laughter, he described yet another near-escape. Just as he was concluding the story involving a knife wielding drunk at the rowdy Scamps International nightclub, a ‘coloured’ girl in Afro-braids tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hey man,” the girl smiled crookedly, “can you lend me 2 bucks for a beer?”

Evan scowled with the interruption. “Why should I buy you a beer?” he belched, “How do I know if you’re not just a *tsotsi* [thief] lookin’ to rip me off?”

The girl opened mouth in surprise that instantly switched to fury. “Don’t talk shit to me!” she bellowed.

Even in the din of Happy Hour, heads were turning.

“So what’s eating you tonight? Can’t you take a joke?”

“Don’t talk shit to me you dirty fucking white bastard,” she shook her fist, “You’ve come here from Europe to fuck up our country.”

As alarm penetrated alcohol fuzziness, Evan put his finger to his lips. “Hey, calm down— I was just jokin’. You don’t have to get all hysterical.”

“You fucking white bastard— go back to where you belong!” She looked behind her toward a few men drawing closer.

Among them, a tall fellow lurched forward with arm drawn back. Suddenly ‘*whop*’— he slapped Evan in the face— hard. Evan’s glasses went flying. For a long moment Evan remained on the bar stool petrified. Onlookers, not sure whether they were witnessing ZANU-PF style justice or just a drunken scuffle, looked amused.

Evan stood up, his face drained white. Just then the ‘coloured’ girl picked up his glasses from the floor and flung them out the open window. Sensing an escalation, the crowd pressed closer.

“You know why I hit you?” slurred the African comrade as the ‘coloured’ girl grinned beside him.

“No problem, brother,” Holding his cheek, Evan lurched past them pushing straight for the door.

Before following him, I vaguely caught the comrade’s claim, in English, of having executed a political act inspired by the Prime Minister himself. It was well known that in a recent fiery speech given in Shona to a ‘*povo*’ [peasantry] audience, Comrade Mugabe had exhorted: ‘*when the ‘mrungu’ insults you— hit him back— hard!*’

Indeed, from his portrait above the door way, the Prime Minister with his toothbrush moustache, seemed to lend his severe endorsement...

On the sidewalk I hunched in the dark alongside the moaning Evan, looking for his glasses. Yet it was a kindly African girl who joined the search and found them.

With a tsk, she handed them to Evan. One arm of the glasses was broken but fortunately his thick lenses were intact.

“Isn’t that enough for tonight?” I asked. With a dismissive wave, he stumbled off muttering towards the Sportsman bar at the Jameson hotel—a habitu  of expats.

Declining to join him, I went back to my room in the International Hotel next door to the Jacaranda bar. After sitting listlessly on the bed for an hour with a *Newsweek*, I ventured back down into the doorway of the Jacaranda. With no sign of the ‘coloured’ girl or her friends, I cautiously sat back at the bar for a final beer before calling it a night. A few moments later, a Shona girl took the empty stool beside me. She claimed that she had been in the crowd an hour earlier and had witnessed the altercation.

“That coloured girl”, she said, “I know her—she loves to fight. You know that guy who hit your friend? He bought her 2 beers before you guys got here.”

When the girl, who introduced herself as Tina, asked for a drink— I was not inclined to resist.

-1983 Harare

fwt

Aggie's Story

Just as some 'coloured' women in old Rhodesia were keen to identify as 'white', there were some African women who identified as 'coloured.' Sadly enough— that was usually due to similar hopes for upward mobility...

The following is a narration of a Shona woman of my acquaintance in Masvingo, Zimbabwe, in 1983. She had lived with a 'coloured' family in her early years and eventually had a daughter with an abusive white man. While she admitted to having little schooling due to circumstances beyond her control, her colloquial English was fluent.

Still, I assumed that her style of speech was well adapted to the white men she was accustomed to accommodating: those being Rhodies of rougher edge.

As always, personal names are fictionalized:

In inviting me over for a get together last night with a few of his friends, Ferg mentioned that a friend of Jenny, the Zimbabwean wife of Australian teacher, Sam, who teaches at Macheke High, will be there. Ferg described this friend of Jenny's, called Aggie, as: "A really nice girl who's had a rough go of it."

According to Ferg, Aggie has been dating an older Australian teacher, a former monk, but she was interested in meeting other expats who were not quite so given to drink.

In late afternoon, however wary, I walked over to Ferg's place to join him and his Aussie drinking buddies. As expected, Aggie was in attendance.

Aggie was a little older than anticipated— probably close to my age. She was coffee skinned and a little thick around the middle— but with a warm smile, despite a chipped front tooth. After an hour of preliminaries, I asked her if she's like to walk over to my place, where we could continue chatting in a quieter space...

She was even chattier than my former domestic worker, Angela M., although much more a product of the township than of village life. Having spent her early teens in Arcadia, she seemed to be more 'coloured' than Shona.

She was not only chatty— but uninhibited and frank. Over beer, cigarettes and even a reefer of *dagga* (which I did not share) she spoke of her hopes, desires and bitter disappointments. Fascinated by her story, immediately after her departure I wrote down the details as she had told them to me:

"...When I was a little girl we worked planting mealies [maize] for 10 cents a day. If you didn't finish your row, you got nothing— only *sadza*. Things were really tough then, in the Smith days. My father worked for \$5 a month. My brother who worked in Bata Shoes, in Gweru, sent money home for me to go to Primary school. But my father ate it all himself..."

“...In primary school, I had this mistress— O, she was very cruel! When we didn't finish our work, she used to make us kneel down out in the hot sun for hours. I got angry one day, and called her ‘*mbeche amai*’— ‘your mother's pussy.’ My father pulled me away from school, but he kept eating the money from my brother...”

“...That's when I was sent to the white man's farm to plant the mealies. It was there that my virginity was broken. It was at the swimming hole by a very rough boy. He was my boyfriend for a little while, but I left him. He was just too rough!”

“...My sister discovered that my virginity was broken so she came to collect me. She wanted to save me from being impregnated. She got me a job as a domestic with a coloured family in Gweru town. Ah, they were very kind to me, that family! I stayed in a bedroom with their kids. They taught me English. They even wanted to send me to school but my brother snatched me away. He was afraid the town life would turn me into a bitch. I was then sent back to the farm—back to planting mealies...”

“...I kept having this dream. I was always dragging myself out of a ditch. It was so painful. My legs were like tree trunks. When I found out from my mother that my *matupa* [totem] was *nzou*, ‘elephant’—instead of ‘*gombe*’, [leg] like my brothers and sisters—my luck started to change... “

... I ran away from the farm. I had another ‘sister’ in the Mbare township who asked me to come and work for her... Those first years in Harare are a blur. I was drinking, bitching around. But then I got a white boyfriend, Tony. He impregnated me, then took me to live with him in Houghton Park because at that time, I was still young and pretty...”

“...Then Candy was born. I was drunk— really drunk. I was holding a beer when I went for labour. The baby was born drunk. When it came out, it wouldn't even cry. But she was so *white*, that girl! Tony's blood was so strong! No one could believe that I was her mother...”

“...Later Tony found me a cleaning job in the Rainbow Cinema. I got in trouble because I couldn't read the tickets to tell the people which rows to go to. I got sacked...”

“...Back in home in Houghton Park, Tony started drinking really heavy. Yikes, the hidings he gave me! At first he used his belt buckle. Tony accused me of bitching around so he began to lock me up. I used to escape through the window. When he found out, he seriously beat me. Not just with his belt. He used his fists. Once with a beer bottle he nearly put out my eye. When he knocked out my teeth, I couldn't stand it any more. I ran away, but I had to leave Candy with him. In the Smith days, they used to think that a coloured infant was better off in an orphanage than in a *kraal*...”

“... I got back to Fort Victoria, and tried to earn money in the Macheke market. I knitted toques and crocheted table clothes, but I earned very little. It was tough, very tough! Then after independence, these Australian teachers came to Fort Victoria. Jenny C., you know, we

were together in those days. Then Jenny met Sam, who was working in Mucheke High. Sam is very kind. It was really a wonderful thing Sam did to marry Jenny...”

“... I was also lucky to meet Robby in Bob's tavern. Robbie works for the railways, he's old but kind—I don't want to hurt him. He's not much interested in sex—he just wants someone to go fishing with. Ah, I love to fish but I'm scared to go out in Robby's boat. I hate those crocodiles and those *'kibosho'*. What do you call them in English? Like big cattle? Hippos? I'm really frightened of those hippos—they could push over a boat. I'm very good at fishing, you know. I caught twelve bottle fish. Robby kept only one for eating. The rest he gave to me. I sold 10 at Mucheke market and got \$15....”

“... Yes, Robby is very kind to me— very kind. He buys me food and even paid my rent a few times. But he's old; he's got 6 kids. He's even got daughters older than me! I'm really scared of his wife. She's very religious: Dutch Reformed Church. Robby said she didn't have sex with him in 15 years. She's down in South Africa now, but when she comes back, hey! I don't love him, really. He's too old. More than 50, I think. My wish is to get a man to take care of me so that I can go to court and get my daughter back from Tony. If I could find someone younger to marry me— that's what I really want...”

“...Sam introduced me to this other Australian teacher, Morley. He is a real alcoholic, that man. A half bottle of whiskey every day! He's very shy—he used to be a priest, I think. Maybe he is a homosexual. But Morley is very kind to me. He even paid for a bridge for my front teeth. He said if I went to school and learned hard, he would marry me...”

“...I started going to adult education classes in Macheke High. One night Jenny and I were coming back from the Chevron Hotel when we got hit by a pirate taxi. I broke right through the windscreen. A piece of glass cut right through my 'tittie' and my leg was broken in 2 places. Ah, it was painful! We went to court but the judge said because we were drunk, it was our fault. The driver of the pirate taxi didn't even have to pay us damages...”

“...I spent 6 months with my leg in plaster. That's how I grew fat. One night at the Chevron, I vomited and lost my bridge. Morley got angry. He didn't speak to me for the last 2 weeks...”

However touched by her story, when I walked her back to Ferg's place for a lift back to Masvingo, I did not have the heart to tell her straight up that she was wasting her time on me. Instead, I told her I'd get in touch after getting back from my upcoming vacation in Kenya.

-1983, December, Masvingo, Zimbabwe

Additional Note:

Several years ago, I received an email from the Australian teacher, Sam, whose wife had been a friend of Aggie's. He reported that Aggie had married Morley, the former monk, and

emigrated to Australia along with her daughter, Candy. However, at length she grew homesick and made her way back to Zimbabwe. Although Sam and his wife had not heard news of Aggie for a few years, he said that Candy, now in her late-30s, had stayed on in Australia.

It was poignant to hear that in the matters that count most, Aggie's survival skills had prevailed...

-2017

fwt

Losing Lloyd

Corporal punishment was not uncommonly used in classroom management in Zimbabwe in the early '80s. I had wisely avoided it until faced with a particularly restless Form Two class assigned to me at Gokomere Secondary in 1983. Rattled (and later chastened) by the reaction of a lad called Lloyd whom I had tried to 'punish' for acting out in that class— I took notes of the reverberations that followed over the subsequent days:

1

It was 10 minutes before the end of class in 2E and I was wrapping up instructions for the report on 'A career I could pursue':

"All right, before we go – I want to make sure before the end of next week that everyone... Listen, now— everyone—"

In the back of the classroom, Lloyd Dumaini, who was usually quiet, struck the neck of the boy beside him in 2 swift karate-chops. The victim winced and looked at me, half-pleadingly. How was I to react? Since the rest of the class was still taking notes— for the moment, I chose to ignore the offence.

"Everyone needs to spend time researching this," I went on, "You can't just write a report off the top of your head. You owe it to your classmates not to waste their time. Try to give them some useful information."

Meanwhile, Lloyd was whispering harshly to the other boy. However pricked by his defiance, I still hesitated in reacting. I was determined not to make a sordid spectacle.

Thus determining to punish without drawing attention, I slowly moved toward the back of the class. Stepping up behind Lloyd—I gave him a sharp pinch on the back of the neck— even as I continued 'calmly' continued giving instructions:

"I'd prefer you didn't write about doctors, or teachers or politicians... Think of a career that other students might know nothing about."

Meanwhile, Lloyd had grabbed my hand and twisted out of my grasp, scratching my wrist. Even up to that point— most the other students were unaware of what was going on behind them. Still grappling, I went on talking:

"I expect you to research this carefully and give details— details about the qualifications needed for the career."

Suddenly a tuft of hair was drifting to the floor. Lloyd sprung to his feet. In the bang of his desk, all heads turned.

"Sit down!" I yelled.

Lloyd was then standing, breathing heavily. He sprang away to the front of the class where he stood near the doorway glaring defiantly. "No, I won't," he said.

"I told you to come back here and sit down," My voice was shaking.

"No!" With a hand on his head, he ran out.

In the buzz of student murmurings that followed, I barked: "OK, com'on now— let's get back to work..."

Shaking the paper with the assignment instructions, I knew that all eyes were on the red welt on the back of my hand.

2

The following day:

As I entered classroom 2E this morning, Lloyd was at his desk at the back looking up defiantly. I tried not to tremble.

"Lloyd, I did not give you permission to come back into class. Not until you apologize." In the bluff of resoluteness, my heart thudded.

After an uncertain moment of defiance, he fumbled under his desk. "I'm leaving."

"Hurry up—" I gruffed, "out with you!"

"I'm getting my books."

Thoughtlessly, I upped the ante. "No, you're not— get out now and leave those books behind. Now!"

For a damnable instant, my voice uncontrollably wavered. In the same thoughtless instant, I lunged forward. Lloyd scampered away empty-handed toward the door— snatching the math textbook a conspirator handed him on the way out.

"Lloyd, come back here— drop that book!" (I might well have shouted: '*Stop or I'll shoot!*'))

As he disappeared around the corner, I stood outside the doorway glancing up and down the empty corridor. Turned back to the class, I faced the glare of 42 of his fellow students. In that moment, I might well have been a Rhodesian cop.

Unable to hide my trembling hand, I stepped back behind my desk. If only I'd had the presence of mind to shout out a warning— all this would have been avoided. Still an

empty threat might just as easily have backfired. Eyes swimming, I shuffled papers. Should I go to the principal and tell him straight up before rumours fly? No, that would only magnify a minor incident. Best to just brazen it out...

3

The following Monday morning:

When I entered class 2E this morning, the following letter was found on the corner of the teacher's desk:

Dear Sir,

I apologize for what I did in school last week. When you came and plucked my hair I was shocked and stood up. My hair is not allowed to be plucked by someone not from my family. This is very bad luck. Either I will be sick or the one who is plucked it will be (not hospital curable sickness).

Sir, please, we have to do a traditional [sic] together. We have to throw tobacco on the ground anywhere. You and me, and cover it with soil again. This must be done by we two. You and me.

I will come to meet you after school at your house on Thursday.

Your student,

Lloyd Dumaini

As I folded the note and put it in my jacket pocket, John and Kudzai watched intently from the front row.

"I think Lloyd wants to come back to class, sir." said the oft toadying John.

"It's not your concern," I mumbled before chirping: "Do you and Kuzwai mind collecting the homework?"

Later that afternoon, I hailed Mr. Makamba, the chemistry teacher, from my open front door as he was about to visit next-door neighbour, Mr. Makojo.

"Mr. Makamba," I said smiling, you're one of our resident 'n'angas' [traditional healers]. Can I show you something."

He laughed in catching my reference to his involvement earlier in the year when Miss Nettie, on the other side of the duplex, thought that her place was invaded by 'spooks.'

While trying to downplay any impression that I was rattled by Lloyd's request, I was still eager for Makamba's advice. Moments later, he was sitting across from me with a proffered drink in hand.

"What do you make of this? "

I unfolded Lloyd's note on the coffee table before him.

"Hummm," He rolled the proffered tot of rum in his glass as he read. Scratching his beard, he chuckled. "Well, honestly, Mr. T., I've never heard of such things."

"You think Lloyd might just be bullshitting?"

"Honestly, this is new to me." He looked around glancing at the titles on my bookshelf.

"Well, is it possible, Mr. Makamba, that it may be a belief peculiar to his region?"

Makamba raised his eyebrows. "Do you know what region he is from?"

"No idea."

"How long is his hair?"

"Moderately long – but not long as a Rasta's. So you've never heard of people who believe that it's taboo to touch their heads?"

"No, I've never heard of that." His eyes wandered to the joke-shop rubber spider quivering atop my radio-cassette.

"So could that just be something personal? Or maybe a belief just confined to his family?"

"Could be..." He laughed.

"So would you advise me to go through with his ceremony?"

"I really can't say, Mr. T. You have to be the judge of that. Dumaini, Ai-yee— what a character!" He took the last swallow and looked to the bookcase.

"Do you mind if I borrow this, Mr. T.?"

"Be my guest," I picked up the empty glasses as he pulled out the biography of Hitler, by Joachim Fest.

In that moment I decided to go through with Lloyd's ritual.

4

Three days later:

At 5:30 PM, there came a timid knock at my door. Standing in the darkening doorway was a doleful Lloyd Dumaini.

"Lloyd, I was expecting you. You're serious about this?"

He nodded, eyes averted.

"Well, OK." Rather than inviting him in— I went straight to the heart of the matter. "Have you brought the tobacco?"

"No." He fidgeted.

"Let me think..." I remembered the half pack of Malawi cigarettes left a few weeks ago by one of the Canadian teachers visiting from the school in Gutu. It was tucked at the back of the bookshelf. "I've only got cigarette tobacco. Will that do?"

"Yes".

"OK. Where will we do it?"

"Out there." He pointed behind him at the edge of the yard beside the clothesline post.

Taking along the cigarettes, I followed him out in the dusk. We knelt together and I crumbled the stale tobacco ('Life' brand). He dug a little hole with a twig and sprinkled the grains of tobacco into it. He thereupon whispered in Shona what I took to be an incantation. Together we cupped dirt into the hole, smoothed it over and tamped it down. Throughout the process, he muttered more incantations.

Lloyd rose first— then I followed— laying a hand tentatively upon his shoulder.

"Look, I'm sorry, Lloyd. We both should have known better."

"It's all right now," he said softly.

5

The next day:

The report of the incident became the topic of discussion in the staff room morning tea break:

History teacher, Comrade Mapengo, said with an accompanying snicker: "So now you've seen with your own eyes into the heart of primitive uncivilized Africa."

Fellow Canuck, Ferg, chimed in: "Did Dumaini really put you through that? Jeepers!"

Later at lunchtime, domestic helper, Angela, also weighed in:

"Oh yes! So many families here are having their own queer beliefs. My aunt knew this woman who couldn't stand to be pointed at. When someone pointed at her she could see it— even from behind. She'd freeze right in her tracks. She'd stand frozen there until someone came up and crooked a little finger. It made sound like this: '*crack*'! Then she'd instantly unfreeze and walk away normally."

Amid all these tacit assurances that Lloyd's 'traditions' were outside the Shona mainstream— I felt relieved— but certainly not absolved of my transgression.

6

Two week thereafter:

Lloyd has again stopped coming to class. Although the day after the ceremony he was back sitting quietly in the rear of the classroom, for the last week he has been absent.

In the principal's office to inquire about a shift to quieter quarters, I casually asked:

"Oh yes, one more thing, Mr. Mashonga: I was wondering, do you have any idea why Lloyd Dumaini in 2E hasn't been in class for the last week? He missed the mock exam this morning."

Mr. Mashonga gave a tight smile.

"He's left the school."

"What?"

"He's gone for good."

"Really?"

Even with the queue of students waiting at the door up to pay school fees, the kindly Mr. Mashonga took 5 minutes to explain the situation.

Apparently, Lloyd's father came to his office to say that his son had tried to sneak back into the family dwelling in Macheke township. The father said that Lloyd had come in the middle of the night to gather his belongings, but the father called the police to" chase

him away". Lloyd's father apparently went on to tell Mr. Mashonga that Lloyd had become a "turpentine addict." He said that his son deserved to be expelled.

In spite of all that, Mr. Mashonga told the father he was willing to give Lloyd another chance.

"I showed him his record," said the principal. "Lloyd was passing all his subjects well. We agreed that I would give him a strong warning but let him carry on. But then Lloyd ran away to Harare. He didn't want to continue."

"That's terrible!"

At that juncture, I was ready to confess the incident involving the 'accidental' hair pulling and the tobacco ritual that followed. Yet when Mr. Mashonga looked at me intently with a sly smile—I had no doubt that he already knew the details.

"Yes, it's a shame,' he said, but there's nothing we can do. It's the boy's own decision."

As I turned on my heel, I recalled the class a few days after Lloyd came back when he took his turn giving his 'presentation' on '*a career I could pursue*'. For 5 minutes he rambled on about the advantages of being a garden boy (no skills necessary, peace and quiet *etc.*)

If his presentation was just a show of bluster it was met only with silence from both fellow students and from a seemingly callous '*mrungu*' teacher. If it was a troubled young man's '*cri de coeur*'—the only response it received was a 'D' grade. Annoyed by the apparent cheekiness, I did not even write a comment.

Without question it was the *mudzidzisi* [teacher] who got the 'F'.

1983, Gokomere

Ghost Bride

The day before a vacation flight to Malawi in Dec. '83, I kept a promise to attend the wedding of a teaching colleague from my previous school near Harare. The ceremony was held at Enkeldoorn Township, 30 kilometers south of Harare:

I phoned the Zangure family contact number from Harare. A woman's voice came through the crackly line. With limited English, she got the message across that a township bus did pass near the site of the wedding.

After checking into the Elizabeth Hotel, I walked to the bus station on Manica Rd. and caught the Chivu township bus. Getting off 2 stops too soon, I had to walk for nearly 20 minutes in the sultry heat past blocks of corrugated tin kiosks. With the sight of a *mrungu* passing on foot so rare here, sullen stares bore into my back as I made my way through the dusty lanes between the ramshackle huts.

I eventually reached what appeared to be a community hall with clusters of men standing outside, dressed in suits. Women also sat on mats outside and the men standing by the door were drinking beer and *Chibuku*, otherwise known as 'shake-shake'.

Yet what I first assumed to be the wedding venue turned out to be a Christmas party for a 'burial society'. Still, one dapper fellow wearing a badge and ribbon identifying him as a proud due-paying member directed me to the wedding hall, a few more sweltering blocks further along.

I reached the venue just in time to see the wedding party cars, bedecked in ribbons, pulling up outside the community hall with Tom Zangure and his fairer-skinned bride stepping out of a shiny car. Being the only *mrungu* among the throng standing outside the hall, I was a little hesitant to drift inside. Fortunately, at that moment, I saw 2 other former colleagues from Sandringham school—skinny young Mr. Chari, and the vice principal, Mr. Banda. The latter stood ramrod stiff—the affected pose of a part-time cop—such as he was.

Squeezing inside the stuffy tin roofed hall alongside my Sandringham colleagues, I discovered that the ceremony underway was not the actual wedding – but the gift-giving ceremony for the bride's relatives. A reggae number blared out from a loudspeaker as the crowd began clapping and whistling. As the crescendo built, the wedding party did a shuffling dance across the center floor.

After the raucous dance, a fat bald 'uncle' in a shabby suit, the acting MC, held up both hands to quiet the crowd. Holding one hand on a chair to steady himself, he beckoned the attendees to come forward with their gifts.

As guests filed forward handing him the gifts, he held up each in turn, identifying each item and proclaiming from whom it was bestowed.

“10 dollas!” he held up a \$10 bill snapping it between fingers. “*tatenda* [thank you], Comrade Gumbo!”

I sweated momentarily in the fact that the wedding card I brought contained only a \$5 note. Mercifully, I saw a few others moving towards a table at the side that contained a gift ‘tree’. Discreetly, I slipped my envelope among the others.

After the proclamation of gifts, there was an opportunity to toast the nuptials.

A friendly teacher from Chibero College whom I stood beside translated to me the words of one old uncle from the groom's family. In his praise of the bride, the uncle said she was “beautiful as a *bhodhoro redoro*”, a bottle of beer.

“Why compare her to a ‘bottle’?” I asked.

“For villagers”, he whispered, “a real bottle of beer is something rare and pure.”

After the ceremony the same friendly teacher offered me a lift back to Harare. On the drive back, he asked me if I was married.

“No, I’m still a bachelor,” I said.

“A bachelor?” he said with a chuckle, “you know in our culture it is very important for a man to marry.”

He went on to describe that a strange custom awaits the mature man who dies unmarried. Apparently, a dead rat is thrown into the grave.

“The old people believed that the spirit of an old bachelor would be restless. It will haunt his living relatives and pester them for not helping him gain a wife or children... With the rat in the grave the relatives can say: ‘*Look in your grave. There is the wife we gave you!*’ Ha!”

Spooked, I gave a nervous laugh.

1983, Masvingo

Complicity?

The following snippet from my 1986 notebook is based on an incident witnessed on 1st Street, in downtown Harare. It was the first time I had seen such a confrontation on that upscale pedestrian mall, but it seemed ominous. However tolerant and kind the Shona people— it seemed that the increasing volume of incendiary anti-western (and anti-white) propaganda spewed out by the government media was beginning to sink in:

On a Friday afternoon at 5:00 PM on a payday, the entrance area to the OK Bazaars Supermarket on the corner of First Street and Baker Avenue is still the busiest corner in Harare.

Last Friday precisely at this time, an elderly white lady in dark green sunglasses emerged from a vintage Austin at the curb and stumbled absently into a heap of grocery bags piled on the pavement. A squat African lady, in her 20s (from a rural area by dress) lunged forward:

"You think you can step on my bags just because you're white?" She barked in English.

Without warning, the African woman shoved the old white lady who teetered for a moment and then fell flat on her back amid the bags of groceries. As the old white woman lay hopelessly turtled on the pavement, several onlookers surrounded the offended African woman grinning and laughing. Meanwhile more urbanely dressed Africans in business suits, glanced nervously from the grocery pickup queue as a 'coloured' store employee, stepped forward extending his hand to pull the elderly white woman to her feet.

The old woman stoically shuffled forward into the grocery store queue behind a younger white woman who turned and asked softly:

"Are you all right?"

Others in the queue 'tsked' and kicked their feet while the knot of rural Africans surrounding the offended comrade on the sidewalk chuckled and talk excitedly in Shona.

Standing frozen at the street corner, I was reminded of Christopher Isherwood's descriptions of the varying reactions to Hitler youth gangs beating up on hapless Jews in the street in Berlin in the early 1930s. While there were a few heroic Germans confronting the bad Germans it was the majority of passive and cowed Germans who most enabled tyranny. So, by standing passively watching— was I not among the complicit?

1986, Harare

Rhodesian Mischief

By the mid- '80s, most whites who still considered themselves Rhodesians had already 'taken the gap' from Zimbabwe to South Africa, Great Britain or Australia. The small core of whites who remained were mostly farmers, business owners and a few professionals. Uneducated and/or semi-skilled whites were increasingly rare.

The following vignette from my '86 notebook was based on an incident that occurred at Kutama Mission, a few months after I was posted to its boys' secondary school. The mission was established by Marist Brothers: several of whom were from Quebec. Significantly, Kutama was also the natal home of then Prime Minister 'Comrade' Robert Mugabe.

Through the window the usual comfortable sounds of the rural mission (bird song punctuated by the occasional car engine and lowing of cows) was suddenly interrupted by a sharp growl, a scream and scurry of feet.

A few moments later, Dorika, our domestic helper, returned with a bottle of milk from the kitchen and announced:

"The sister of Euphrasia has been bitten."

Euphrasia was a schoolgirl who occasionally came to play with our baby, MT. So had her sister been '*bitten*' or '*beaten*'? Dorika resolved the usual confusion with the Shona vowel by pointing to her leg and making a growling noise.

"You mean she was *bitten* by a dog?"

"Yes, serious. She was running to school. That big black dog next door got away from that fat woman."

'That fat woman' referred to the spouse of a Rhodie white couple working with the road tarring crew, who moved in next-door just last week. They were part of the crew of road workers who for the last few weeks had been scurrying to tar the road to the traditional home of Comrade President Mugabe before His Excellency's birthday.

The Mission's Marist Brothers gave the Rhodesian foreman and his wife the corrugated tin hut as temporary lodgings. They came with a truckload of furniture and immediately erected a wire fence around the hut upon which they tacked up a sign: '*Chenjera Mbwa*' [beware of the dog].

Later that same afternoon, Dorika and my wife were at the window chuckling:

"My God, look at that fat lady next door! She's kissing chickens!"

I joined them just in time see the straggly haired white woman in blue jeans and a shapeless shift turning back towards her door through the tall grass behind her hut. Sure enough, she was rubbing against her cheek the two plump chickens nestled in her arms.

Dorika and my wife clucked their tongues and shook their heads.

"Maybe she just loves animals," I said.

"She should have children," said my wife.

An hour after Dorika reported the biting incident, she called excitedly from the doorway:

"Euprasia's brother is out there. He wants to *beat* the fat white man!" This time she distinguished the vowel with a clench of her fist.

"Euprasia's brother studied in Bulgaria," Dorika added as I brushed past her to view the action.

100 meters up the road, a small crowd was gathering in the driveway of the parish priest's house. A half-ton truck bearing the road construction company name, 'Cementation', was parked sideways in the driveway. Standing beside the open door of his truck was the Rhodesian road foreman in baseball cap. From the waist of his red tracksuit, a large stomach protruded. Straining toward him in black T-shirt and blue jeans was Euprasia's brother. Between the two was Father Fuge, the German Jesuit priest of Kutama mission.

"You are *shit*," the comrade bellowed. "'You are worse than shit!'"

The Rhodie leaned backwards hands on large hips. His sneer suggested equal contempt for the 'comrade' and the European priest who would betray a fellow white. In an effort to restrain, Father Fuge touched the shoulder of the comrade.

"Please," he said.

"You are a cor-rupt bastard!" said the Bulgarian-trained comrade, ignoring the priest. "*Ve-ry cor-rupt!*" With each syllable the comrade wagged his finger toward the Rhodesian. His words hung in the air as the onlookers watched expectantly for fists to fly.

"Calm down, calm down," beseeched the white Father, lifting his hand again to the comrade's straining shoulder. "We can settle this reasonably."

The Jesuit crossed his arms and dropped his head. It was probably not the first time his credibility as a peacemaker had been challenged before parishioners.

Still, the mood seemed to shift as the comrade, seemingly sensing a victory without a punch-up, half turned to the onlookers. "That dog must go immediately— immediately!"

He continued wagging one finger in the Rhodie's face while pumping his other hand to emphasize his words. "There will not be a single child bitten here again— not one. You will pay dearly for this, you corrupt bastard—*you will pay!*"

The Rhodesian, still defiant in the shield of his company truck, finally spoke.

"I'm on the job. I don't have to talk to you at all," he said, "not until I've talked to my *baas*."

The German Jesuit scratched the back of his neck dropped his head again and sighed. At least he would be spared refereeing a fistfight...

There followed hours of nervous consultation involving Father Fuge, along with the Marist Brother Superior of the mission and the white boss of the construction company whose pickup trucks screeched in and out of the priest's driveway all afternoon. Meanwhile, the comrade brother of the bitten child sat on the church steps as calm and calculating as a guerrilla waiting in ambush.

In the hours that followed, apparently through the negotiations of the Cementation company *baas* and the Mission Brother Superior, a settlement was reached. The little girl who was bitten was driven from the local clinic to the Norton hospital in a company truck driven by the stout Rhodie himself. She spent the night under observation. The road building company agreed to meet all hospital expenses and would pay an undisclosed sum of money to the child's family in compensation.

With these details from Dorika the following day, also came the report that Euphrasia's little sister had not been the first to be bitten by the Rhodie foreman's dog. In only four days at the mission, the beast claimed no fewer than four victims including a young girl selling tomatoes and an old man riding past the hut on a bicycle. Its selective viciousness raised the suspicion that it must have been trained to attack Africans only.

Still, according to the negotiated settlement, the dog was not to be put down but rather exiled to a kennel in Harare.

In the dog's final night on the mission, not a single bark was heard. On the following afternoon, another pickup truck bearing the company's name with a wire cage in the rear backed up to the door of the hut. The fat Rhodie in baseball cap and his *baas* in baggy shorts emerged. A few minutes later, his wife came out, holding the chain upon which strained a large brown Ridgeback. After the brute was trundled into the cage, the white woman who kissed chickens, groped forward and pushed her cheek up to the wire:

"You be good, Mischief," she said, sniffing.

1986, Kutama Mission

Perceptions from Arcadia:

Just days before my final departure from Zimbabwe with my wife and 2 baby daughters in Aug. 1988, I was an overnight guest of my ex-wife's cousin in the Arcadia neighborhood of Harare. This was not the first time I had enjoyed the hospitality of my wife's 'coloured' in-laws but it is with a special poignancy that I remember the conversation of that evening:

1

Needing to spend a few days office-hopping in Harare in preparation for final departure and being on a tight budget, I gladly accepted the offer to stay one night with T.'s cousin, Elvis and his wife, Reena. Elvis, a supervisor with Zimbabwe Railways, and Reena (several years older than Elvis) live in Arcadia, once known as Salisbury's most exclusive 'coloured' neighbourhoods. Their sprawling house and its furnishings belies any signs of Zimbabwe's economic decline.

Although 'the spare room' where I slept was a windowless alcove of the garage designed as a servant's quarters— Reena graciously invited me to dine with the family and lounge afterwards in their opulently furnished living room.

The daughters, a secretary and a bookkeeper, sat in overstuffed sofas before the Sony Trinitron colour TV, occasionally blinking nervously towards me. Their younger son, on school holidays was apparently visiting relatives in Bulawayo.

Just before dinner, we were joined by Paul— a young white manager in the plumbing supplies firm where Elvis's daughter, Dawn, kept the books. We made introductions after which I joked about my paper-chase obstacle course. Paul commented:

"I'm not the least surprised. I worked for a time with the Ministry of Education in the Records Department. But it became such a mess when the blacks took over. Really, it was utter chaos! The problem was that most of the new Shona speaking officers just couldn't properly understand the Education Act. They could not refer to specific articles in proper English. It was atrocious! I've never learned Shona— I never really had any need for it. My second language is Afrikaans."

Politely nodding, I did not mention that my wife is Shona.

Soon afterwards, we repaired to the dining room where we enjoyed a glass of South African rosé along with the fine meal of chicken and rice. Over dessert, the young white businessman lit a South African cheroot. When I made the careless remark that I would miss the local sparking wine, he tapped his plate and scoffed:

"Zimbabwean wine? It's just firewater, pure plonk— only good for getting smashed on!"

2

After the white boyfriend and Dawn headed out for a movie, we retired to the living room with post-prandial tea. In chatting about the recent popularity of Zimbabwe as a film location, I mentioned having seen on 1st Ave. Canadian actor, Donald Sutherland, on location for the filming of *'a Dry White Season'*. This provided house mother, Reena, with a segue to tell of her recent brush with Hollywood:

"Can you believe I had a chance to act with Richard Chamberlain when he was here filming *'King Solomon's Mines'*? Really I could have had a part as one of his wives."

As she beamed, I could certainly imagine her, bedecked with gold jewelry, a very plump senior wife of an Ethiopian chief.

"The producer was given a photograph of Reena," said Elvis. "He said: 'yes, she's perfect for the part!' She only had to say 'yes.'"

"I backed out at the last minute," laughed Reena. "I would have to wear very skimpy clothes. I was just too shy! But oooh—Richard Chamberlain... He could leave his slippers under my bed *any* night!"

"Don't you know he's a bum boy?" quipped Elvis.

On the sofa across the wide living room, the secretary daughter stretched like a pampered cat. Meanwhile, we distractedly watched the video episode of the *'The Thorn Birds'*, which was fortunately playing at low volume. As the credits rolled, I once again complimented Rita on her fine cooking:

She beamed. "I remember when I was little my mother would always dish out an extra plate of food in the kitchen in case a visitor came. Even when no one came, she would still dish out that extra plate. 'That's for the hungry stranger', she would say."

When I again effused gratitude for her hospitality in her "beautiful home", she said:

"We know we have to keep up a high standard. Especially since this neighbourhood has gone so much downhill."

I insisted that while her house was especially beautiful, Arcadia appeared to still be an attractive suburb by any standard. Reena scoffed:

"Nothing like Borrowdale! It was wealthier coloured people who weren't allowed to live in the white suburbs like Borrowdale or Avondale and who first built in this area. O, they did their best to make Arcadia pleasant but I'm afraid it's going downhill."

With a jiggle of her bracelet, she said: "You know, I grew up in Bulawayo. To be honest, the coloured people there have always been more sophisticated and civilized than the

coloureds in Harare. We trace our ancestry back 3 or even 5 generations to the Cape Coloureds of South Africa. Most of the coloureds here in Arcadia have an African granny— even African mothers...”

Elvis stared glumly at the ZBC news on the muted TV. Scratching a bulging calf curled beneath her, Reena continued:

“I love Cape Town!” But you know I couldn't live there now. It's shameful, really, how the coloured people in South Africa have accepted an inferior position. You should see their houses – little boxes crowded together. Similar to the little concrete house you were living in out there in Sandringham. Oh, they have their big TV inside and their big cars out in front— but still it's shameful! Even doctors and lawyers like my cousin seem to accept having to live in little boxes!”

As Reena grew more talkative I listened intently, only occasionally asking questions, such as how fluent she was in Afrikaans. She said she had lost some of her fluency due to speaking mostly English over many years, but she still remembered proverbs learned in childhood:

“You know there are many wise sayings in Afrikaans – they always lose something in translation but one I can try: *"never spit into a stream after you drink because the world is round and the water will travel around the world and in your travels you will eventually come back to the same place."* Smiling, she jiggled her arm in a circle.

Finally, she spoke of her religiosity: “I've always had a weak heart, you know. I had a stroke when I was only 30 years old and 6 months later I became pregnant! My doctor recommended that I get an abortion. At that time, a whole panel of medical experts had to decide whether a baby could be aborted to save the life of the mother. 2 heart specialists and 2 gynecologists all agreed that I must get an abortion, otherwise I would die. They all thought it certain.

You know what I told them?” Solemnly, she looked straight into my eyes: “I told them: ‘Yes, but we are all going to die. You— as well as me. Whether young or old that is certain.’ I told them I would let God decide. They tried everything to persuade me but I was stubborn. I would not abort the child!” Pausing for dramatic effect, she smiled and ‘tsked’.

“That baby— my son, Brennan, was born healthy— but in the car on the way to the hospital! Everyone was panicking: there were doctors and nurses bumping into each other and bumping into their equipment when the car pulled up to the emergency ward. They shoved an oxygen mask into my face. I pulled it off! I was the only one who was calm. Later, my doctor, Dr. Saunders (he was wonderful!), called all the doctors and nurses together into his ward. He said:

‘Now this is over let's all have a big pot of tea right here... Reena’, he said, ‘having a healthy baby in your condition is a medical miracle. You must be praying to the right God.’ He was Jewish. ‘After tonight.’ He said, ‘I think your God must be the true one.’”

Through her mother’s lengthy monologue, Reena’s younger daughter was dozing on the sofa. With the ZBC news winding down, Elvis turned up the volume on the TV.

When Reena’s daughter joined her mother in kitchen Elvis turned up the TV. I headed out into the garage to bunk down, trailed by the thumping theme to ‘*Dallas*’.

1988 Harare

fwt

Beneath Rhodesian Honour?

More than 3 decades after leaving Zimbabwe— when taken by a certain mordant curiosity— I have watched video clips of Salisbury shoppers, circa 1960, or Selous Scouts, circa 1976, dropping from helicopters to the tune of Clem Tholet's: "Rhodesians Never Die"...

While I have never budged in my contempt of the myth of 'heroic little Rhodesia betrayed by the west', I believe that camaraderie under siege and belief in lost causes still make for fascinating history.

There is certainly irony that Mugabe would not only become more virulently racist than Ian Smith but that his regime would exceed Smith's most dire predictions of impending economic ruin. Still, one need tread very carefully in recognition that nostalgia for Rhodesia is found among the same elements that cherish the 'lost cause' of the Confederate States of America...

Nevertheless, looking back to my brief passage though Zimbabwe, I try to appreciate just how foreigners like myself, working for the new order, were regarded by the besieged remnants of the old.

The following incident occurring in Aug. 1988, just a few weeks before our final departure from Zimbabwe, dispelled any doubts that the impending emigration of a mixed family was both appropriate and timely:

Just before leaving Harare late yesterday afternoon, I rushed to the Founders Bank on the 1st St. mall, arriving there just a minute before closing. As I grabbed the door not sure whether to pull or push, I pushed past a young white couple—a pimply fellow and a dark haired girl. Eager to get into the line-up before closing I ignored the "*bloody asshole!*" epithet mumbled at my back.

Being among the last customers to be served, I was let out the side door by the Security Guard. As I slipped onto the busy street I was puzzled— then horrified— that the young white man— the same fellow I'd bumped into at the bank door— was following close behind. Stepping up beside me, he shook his finger at my shirt:

"You bloody asshole!" he said in the unmistakable Rhodie accent.

"Excuse me, what are you talking about?"

"You bloody asshole, don't you know you're bumped into my girlfriend back there? A woman?"

"You mean at the bank?"

"You bloody American asshole, why don't you go back to America where you live like animals?"

Already, mall pedestrians were closing around and staring. Aghast, I surveyed his twitching face. He was ready to hit me.

"Listen, I didn't mean to bump your girlfriend— I didn't even realize. I'm left-handed so maybe I was reaching for the door from the wrong side. Sorry."

He scowled. "OK, I can see that but you're still a bloody fucking animal. You don't have manners. That was a *woman* you bumped into. A *lady* and *my* girlfriend. You almost knocked her down— you bloody asshole."

"I don't remember knocking anyone down. Honestly."

"Here, let me show you what you did, asshole."

He took a threatening step forward to shove me over. At that moment another young white passed by, touched his arm.

"Cool it," the guy mumbled before moving on. Given their dwindling numbers, perhaps both Rhodies knew one another.

I looked back into the pimpled face and down at his hand, clenched and shaking. How would I explain a black eye and swollen cheek to my wife and to my students?

Suddenly, I saw a familiar face among the passersby—it was Mr. Chidenga, the geography teacher and a neighbour at Sandringham. Yet rather than stopping to help—Chidenga gave a sidelong nervous stare and scurried on. This was business between 2 *varungu*.

Meanwhile, the gathering knot of voyeurs was pressing closer, relishing the prospect of a white-on-white dogfight.

"Apologize, you bloody fucking asshole." The pimpled face bore into mine; "you must apologize to me *now*!"

I blustered. "I told you I'm sorry, but I still don't know what exactly what I'm apologizing for."

Just then an old white man in a floppy blue hat stopped a few meters to the side of the voyeurs. He looked no less 75 years old and had the craggy sunburned face of a white farmer. Although the old man stopped only for a few seconds, he seemed to catch the eyes of my tormentor with a censorious glare. As the old man limped away, half-dragging one leg, the pimpled young Rhodie seemed to blush.

Sensing the tension slightly lowered, I looked directly into the sneering face: " Let me say it again: I didn't mean to bump into you or your girlfriend. If that's what happened, I meant no harm or disrespect. It was an accident."

Looking around at the circle of African onlookers, the young Rhodesian took a step back. "OK, I'll leave you now, you asshole. But remember: it's assholes like you who make the world a bloody place!"

With a final sneer he turned and disappeared in the crowd. I strode off, relieved by the growing anonymity as I moved further down the block.

Still, for hours, the shame simmered. Having a black eye for a few days would be far easier to bear than having given a Rhodie satisfaction that striking a 'cowardly American asshole' was beneath his honour.

1988, Harare

fwt