

**UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN, CENTRE FOR FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES
THESIS COVER SHEET**

FULL NAME: John (Jack) Rathmell

STUDENT NUMBER: RTHJOH002

COURSE CODE: FAM5012

TOPIC/OPTION: Creative Project. *This is Africa*, approx. 90,000 word book (separate document), accompanied by this document, *Prehensile*, 10,000 word academic explication.

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Ron Irwin

PLAGIARISM DECLARATION:

1. I know that plagiarism is wrong. Plagiarism is to use another's work and pretend that it is one's own.
2. I have used the APA convention for citation and referencing. Each contribution to, and quotation in this essay from the work(s) of other people has been acknowledged through citation cited and referenced.
3. This essay is my own work.
4. I have not allowed, and will not allow, anyone to copy my work with the intention of passing it off as his or her own work.
5. I have done the word processing and formatting of this assignment myself.
6. I have used a spell and grammar check with a UK language setting before submitting the essay.
7. I have double-checked all proper names and references.

Signature: Jack Rathmell Date: Jan 20, 2023

Signed by candidate

COMPULSORY DECLARATION:

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Jack Rathmell Date Jan 20, 2023

Signed by candidate

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

PREHENSILE

An explication of *This is Africa*, a travel memoir by Jack Rathmell

Abstract:

Prehensile examines the various philosophical themes present in the book, *This is Africa*, as well as addresses the ethical dilemmas and other problems the Western world faces as regards the outside world. The explication also engages in a degree of meta-analysis, discussing the process by which art and self-expression takes place in the modern world; the process by which, in this instance, a book goes from an abstract idea to a physical, marketable product, and what it takes to realise such an ambition in today's world, in which the lines between “individual” and “brand” have blurred, and the internet has become an inescapable part of our daily lives.

Keywords/phrases/themes:

Travel, voluntourism, Orientalism, subjective realism, “Disneyization,” social media, “millennial precarity,” standardisation, perception, (late) capitalism

Table of Contents:

1.Introduction...3

2.1 Literature Review...4

2.2 Travel Writing (General)...5

2.3 Being Perceived...6

2.4 Disneyization...7

3.1 Reflection and Discussion...8

3.2 Voyeurism and Perception of the Outside...8

3.2.1 Implications...10

3.3 Being Perceived...10

3.4 Subjective Reality...10

3.4.1 The Proteus Effect...13

3.5 Objective Truth...16

3.5.1 Standardisation...16

3.5.2 Foucault...17

3.6 Standardisation into Dividuation: Deleuze...19

3.7 Millennial Precarity...20

3.7.1 Tools...23

3.8 Disneyization...24

4. Conclusion...26

5. References...27

1. Introduction

Primarily, *This is Africa* (henceforth T.I.A.) is a book about struggling to find a place in today's globalised, digital world. It is about the status quo, and the navigation of the systems around us that are used to maintain social, political, and economic control. The story is told with South Africa as a backdrop; my three visits (totaling two years) to the country are detailed. My first stint took place as a 19-year-old volunteer, and situated many of the issues discussed below.

The topics discussed in the book include the malaise and paralysis by guilt that so many visitors from the west feel. Nevertheless, the memoir being set in South Africa is largely incidental. The emotional connection and sentimentality I developed with and for South Africa are presented as chance byproducts; I suggest that it could just as likely have been Thailand or Guatemala that catalysed my reflections and personal growth. This realisation comes as a result of reflecting on how humans relay our stories, what mobilises us to act, and just how influential luck is in shaping our conscious existence.

There are also more existential questions at play. In a world where, increasingly, our day to day existence is being commodified and our privacy and personal sovereignty are being encroached upon by multinational tech corporations, those living in the developed world are forced, non-consenting, into a perpetual state of performance and spectacle (Adorno & Bernstein, 2015). At all times, users/consumers are at once being surveilled and surveilling others (Zuboff, 2020). The ways in which people perceive both themselves and the outside world have been co-opted by forces like social media, and are thus constantly in flux at both the individual and societal level. As a result of these forces (the deluge of targeted marketing, cynical media, and corporate propaganda), reality, truth, and perception are more subjective than ever before. A pertinent example of this is the potential for *T.I.A.*'s publishing, and the requirements for this process, which include creating an online presence and offering a curated version of myself for public inspection. Even art and self-expression requires conformity and participation in these norms; I am forced to design and construct a curated version of myself through the lens of how I would like to be perceived by the outside world. The lines between individual and brand have become blurred.

Subjective Realism is another recurring topic. Our warped perceptions can be especially problematic regarding places that have been victims of colonialism and imperialism; travelling Westerners now "inflict" our subjective realities on these other places and peoples.

At the same time, travel - even "non-traditional" travel - has been commodified, thus homogenised and controlled. To travel requires an arduous navigation of various bureaucratic minutiae and lethargy; a signing-away of one's privacy and agency to these actors, at least for a time. Even if you are able to pass these hurdles,

these “exotic” places have also been tampered with. Therefore, the commodification of adventure is another topic of interest: can there be genuine discovery, exploration, or “Wanderlust” today?

The theme of “prehensibility” also appears repeatedly. Much of the memoir is a personal struggle: reaching for meaning in culture, experience, social interaction, and memory. These attempts are often futile, but prove fruitful - or at least thought-provoking - on occasion. The book mostly takes place in South Africa, but the tonality of the writing and the nature of the content suggests that the setting is largely immaterial as it relates to my perceptions, neuroses, and insecurities. Chiefly, the location serves only to provide me with various latching on points onto which I can briefly reflect on whatever issues are at hand. I use the locale as a foil against which I can relativize the sociocultural and political observations I have made at home in the US.

Social hierarchies - explicit or otherwise - are another theme. One of the more memorable examples relates to my interactions with a group of French exchange students I met during my second trip to South Africa. They came to South Africa under the guise of hoping to improve their English, as well as to connect with a foreign country. Neither of these objectives were fulfilled, and the social ecosystem proceeds to devolve into a series of increasingly bizarre interactions. Their biases, insecurities, and misconceptions ensure that their perception of both myself and the country itself will be obfuscated.

Further instances of insularity are discussed in the memoir, leading the author (and reader) into a deeper examination of what travel, charity, and guilt are able to achieve, especially in terms of our innate cognitive biases shaping our experiences and interactions with those whom we believe to be below us [on the social hierarchy]. By inserting ourselves into these complex situations armed only with our saviour complexes, voluntourists inevitably become caricatures; moreover, focusing too much on cultural differences and negative emotion risks driving the wedge of social division further. Indeed, the liberal appetite to right historical wrongs can be patronizing, and can instead serve to *perpetuate* unhelpful norms and beliefs. In TIA, these ethical dilemmas are repeatedly referenced, i.e. Westerners’ inability to find the proper lens through which we can view our experiences in these exotic locales. The thin line between cultural appreciation and appropriation is one that has been barreled through by countless well-meaning actors; the memoir reflects on this ongoing debate.

2.1 Literature Review

This literature review examines the works that have informed the memoir and this explication. The texts discussed in this section offer a unique perspective on travel writing. Their goal is not necessarily to deliver the reader to the place their work is set in, but also to provide them with a new perspective. These authors' varied

approaches set the scene for *T.I.A.* as a collection of memories and reflections. My own positionality informed my approach to storytelling, subconsciously or otherwise, and how to crystallise and preserve these stories and arguments into a physical book. The genre of travel writing is followed by an exploration of the two prevailing themes in the work: perception (and the subjectivity of reality), followed by ‘disneyization’, a term coined by Alan Bryman (2004), exploring the nature of homogenised consumerism.

2.2 Travel Writing

Firstly, books and other literature which influenced and informed my perception of the world - specifically with regards to travel and of other peoples and places. These include writers like Paul Theroux, whose works include *Dark Star Safari* (2011), and *Pillars of Hercules* (1995). By insisting on travelling overland, Theroux forces himself to interact and experience the places he passes through in a more meaningful and intentional way, which lends itself to a far more nuanced, comprehensive appreciation for these places, including the issues they face but also their attributes. This form of resistance (rejecting the superficial, impersonal air travel for slower, more authentic means) is touched upon several times in the book, and connects to the broader themes of resisting homogeneity and optimisation for a more transhumanist approach.

Other informative works include Alain de Botton’s *The Art of Travel* (2014) which gives a more reflective, philosophical view on travelers themselves, the problems they commonly face, their quirks and hang-ups, in order to shed light on how one can become a “better” (p.15-30) traveller - one more capable of appreciating the escapism, novelty, and unfamiliarity of the outside world, and the significant positive effects this could have on both an individual and a cultural level. His conclusions are echoed in the book specifically in the passages recounting my feelings following each of my trips; the negative sentiments; frustration, homesickness, ebbing away to be replaced by a longing to venture out once more.

Bill Bryson’s works have also been formative, most notably, *A Walk in the Woods* (1997), in which he gives a humorous yet informative account of his experience on the Appalachian Trail. He encourages the traveller to appreciate the seemingly small and inconsequential moments and encounters - these anecdotes can be the most revealing, enlightening, and entertaining for the audience. I attempt to emulate this approach in TIA, drawing humor from what might otherwise be mundane, unremarkable anecdotes. If done well, I believe this allows the reader to connect with the author at a more personal, genuine level.

Similarly, Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* (1952) proved that the act of travelling itself is - or can be - simply a plot device; it need not be the sole focus, presented to the exclusion of all else. Jerome uses "travel" as a vehicle to allow for various digressions, ruminations, tangents, and other self-referential anecdotes. This, too, is a technique I employ, particularly with passages such as *Pipe Bomb*, in which I discover a dead seal and use it as an opportunity to reflect on overfishing, our impact on natural habitats, and so on.

The most impactful example of this, however, is David Foster Wallace's *Consider the Lobster* (2005), in which, instead of writing a cheery report on his visit to a Maine Lobster Festival as was his assignment, the author commits fully to debating (with himself) the ethics of killing and eating lobster. Western laziness, gluttony, denial, and selfishness are all addressed at length, as is the minutiae of the crustacean nervous system (whether the animals can feel pain; and what pain even is). Very little coverage is given to the intended topic - I find this self-assuredness inspiring; as an author, you must trust your instincts regarding what you actually want to discuss with the reader. In TIA, I emulate this in chapters like *Respite*, in which I use a chapter about a relatively unremarkable hike to discuss the relentless sprawl of mankind, the tragedy of the commons, etc.

2.3 Being Perceived

Informative writers and works on the topic of being perceived include Edward Said particularly his book *Orientalism* (1978), in which he discusses the way the (Anglo-American) West sees the outside world, specifically Asia and the Middle East, but also Africa. A prerequisite (to justify) imperialist expansion was the dehumanisation of those living in "exotic" places (p.163-165). By shifting this perception, the West was thus able to subjugate and exploit these peoples to fuel its rampant production and accumulation of wealth. Westerners see those living in the "Orient" as people to be examined and observed - not as true equals. Westerners feel they must provide help and pity outsiders [who cannot help themselves].

Where I reference and compare South Africa's racial tensions to those in the US, the discussion is buttressed by work like that of Ta-Nehisi Coates who, in *The Case for Reparations* (2023), discusses the underlying societal issues which happen to be paralleled in South Africa, and the ongoing struggle to bridge these racial inequalities and resolve long-standing conflicts based on the mass subjugation and forced labour of black people.

Another integral work was Binyavanga Wainaina's *How to Write About Africa* (2019). Traditionally, the West wrote about Africa in a problematic manner, using certain images, buzz-words, stereotypes and literary devices to perpetuate the orientalist perceptions listed above. Not least, Westerners are given the idea that Africa is a monolith; its population of over 1 billion people is generally homogenous. Authors like Wainaina are essential to this work not only for the value of the global perspective; be they satirical or simply critical, they alert the reader to biases and misconceptions they might not have known they had. This is not necessarily sinister; our idiosyncratic attachments and sentimentality give our stories their uniqueness. One example of this in my reading was Tiffany Murray's *Big Yellow Taxi* (Palin et al., 2011), in which the traveller, inexplicably, wants nothing more than to see and ride in one of New York City's famous taxis.

2.4 Disneyization, Standardisation, Dystopia & Late Capitalism

The propagation of homogenous experience is a relatively recent phenomena, and as such the works registering this - let alone discussing it - are more recent. A theme - which is reflected in my own work - is ambivalence. Included in these more self-referential, post-modern works are the writings of David Foster Wallace, whose work has been impactful. In particular, his *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (2013) detailing his experience as a traveller in the globalised world, in which the comforts and luxuries of home (i.e. of American suburbia) are now constantly available - indeed, they are almost inescapable; these highly curated, artificial experiences mean that there is no longer such a thing as spontaneity or true discovery. We, as travelers, are supposedly doing so to survey the outside world. Ironically, this now requires us to also be surveilled constantly so as to ensure we are being maximally efficient with our precious few vacation days. Every shred of individuality and creativity is sacrificed for efficiency and optimization.

Mark Fisher addresses the encroachment of calculated homogeneity, and its psychological implications. His works *Ghosts of My Life* (2022), and *Capitalist Realism* (2022) discuss the mechanisms by which this encroachment occurs, and its effects: chiefly, that due to the market's will to power, creativity, art and true cultural evolution are discouraged, keeping us trapped in a limbo, unable to truly escape from our past; nevertheless, most Westerners cannot imagine things being any other way. Indeed, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

Regarding the more philosophical and historical analysis of these issues, the work of thinkers and authors like Deleuze, Baudrillard (specifically his *Symbols and Simulacra*, 1994) and Foucault have been informative. They discuss, along with much else, the ways in which citizens' perceptions of both themselves and of the outside world have been shaped over time, without their knowledge, priming them to be as compliant as possible as consumers and workers.

3.1 Reflection and discussion

The following seven sections add to the discourse regarding the philosophical insights and arguments that have informed *T.I.A.* With the literature review having established the value of travel writing and setting the scene for how *T.I.A.* can contribute in a meaningful way to the genre of travel writing, the following sections delve into more abstract topics, such as the West's construction of reality, disneyization, and subjective reality. These ideas are explored through the below chapters, offering analysis, reflection, and criticism while situating the ideas within sections of TIA, thereby establishing the memoir itself as a case study.

3.2 Voyeurism and Perception of the Outside

Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, introduced in his seminal work of the same name (1978), explores how the West has historically constructed and represented the "Orient" (the Middle East and North Africa) in a biased and discriminatory manner. Said argues that Western scholars, writers, and artists have created a distorted and homogenised image of the East, reinforcing stereotypes and power dynamics. Orientalism, in Said's view, is a form of cultural and intellectual imperialism, serving to legitimise and justify colonialism and domination over the "Orient" (p.162). A crucial distinction between Orientalism and traditional xenophobia is the pseudo-intellectual/scientific bent used by Orientalists to justify these foreign peoples' subjugation. There is a romanticization, a paternalistic stance taken towards these "lovable, noble savages," (p.170). A crucial point here is the idea of "display." The bodies of these "subaltern" peoples in the colonised Orient were to be analysed, examined, and presented; dehumanised, robbed of their subjectivity. This traps both groups in an imbalanced, unjust dynamic.

By examining the ways in which the West has historically portrayed the "East" as exotic, backward, and inherently different, Said exposes the inherent bias in Orientalist discourse. The root issue here is the Western gaze, the mechanism by which the colonial powers feel justified in placing themselves atop the global cultural and evolutionary hierarchy and thus are allowed to be the voyeurs-cum-enforcers of righteous values and norms.

Despite influencing Western perceptions, the concept of Orientalism is rendered somewhat outdated following the rampant spread of capitalism and globalisation over recent decades. Though still applicable in certain circumstances, it fails to account for opportunities for developments no longer being spread out predictably along social and geographic lines (Said, 1978; 2020). It identifies a flawed economic system, but it lacks

individualised, nuanced solutions applicable to today's global society. In part, this is due to the historical lack of a representative metric which accounts for privilege and underprivileged at all levels of society. Widely refuted measures like GDP fail to reliably reflect a country's standard of living or its citizens' quality of life (Said, 2020).

Orientalism constructs an example of optimal life which is centred around Western Europe, but this no longer applies, especially for younger generations now experiencing millennial precarity (Varghese, 2020). It also fails to account for the opportunities for development that lay outside this construction, as well as the Western system's inherent costs. Rampant consumerism and industrialization led to an optimization of abstract thought; the ways in which citizens are trained to think, even at the most fundamental level, are shaped by this system, precluding us from even being able to understand what lies beyond its borders (RamHormozi, 2019). The value consumers believe to be inherent in so much of what they consume is misguided and/or myopic; as such, they fail to appreciate the true value and implications of certain objects. A car for example, allows for personal freedom, exploration of the natural and cultural landscape, etc; it allows for personal development, expansion of ideological horizons (including the knock-on effect from exposure to these other valuable assets). But these nuanced understandings are stunted by Western consumerism, which focuses almost exclusively on quantifiable metrics of output; return on investment, etc. Our abstractions/paradigms insulate us, but also alienate us from each other and the outside world. Indeed; Orientalism does not account for this auto-colonialism (Moore-Gilbert, 2005). This divide between privilege and underprivileged is not distributed uniformly across cultural/geographic boundaries. Nor is human capacity and un-capacity (defined as the lack of access to potential on the intellectual, self-development front.) Amartya Sen combats this, discussing the corrosive, insidious nature of the Western economic system as it relates to its citizens' human potential (*Development as freedom* 2001).

Whorfian linguistics suggest that the structure and vocabulary of a language can shape humans' cognition and interpretation of reality, this is discussed in *T.I.A.* as possibly another explanation for Westerners' struggle to relate to the non-Western world (Whorf et al., 2012). Semantic spaces, mental scaffolding that individuals construct to represent their understanding of the world, are shaped and influenced by language (Aguirre-Celis & Miikkulainen, 2021). Different languages have unique structures and vocabularies, leading to distinct semantic spaces for speakers of each language. Whorfian Linguistics suggests that the speaker's perception can be influenced by the existence of words or expressions in some languages, but not others, which leads to differences in their cognitive representations of the world. Cultural spaces, meanwhile, refer to the broader cultural context within which language is situated (Whorf et al., 2012). Culture influences language, and vice

versa. Norms, beliefs, and behaviours are often encoded in language and reflect the values of a society (Heller & McElhinny, 2017).

3.2.1 Implications

This creates questions regarding a capitalist society's use of language. The values advocated for here include consumerism, greed, and self-interest, and therefore the linguistic emphasis reflects and encourages these ideas. While there are over 50 Eskimo words for snow, for example, there are dozens of English words for money; cash, coins, debt, dividends, and other adjacent terms all have multiple synonyms, both officially and colloquially. With a system determined to study and shape human behaviour, it is therefore to be expected that the constant propagation of this vocabulary and phrasing is a tool employed to keep these ideas at the forefront of collective consciousness. Because so much of this language (and the values and ethics it represents) has become normalised and internalised, it cements this paradigm as the only system of culture and society (Heller & McElhinny, 2017).

As it relates to the aforementioned subjective idealism, the Whorfian hypothesis is relevant in that the former concept suggests that reality is fundamentally psychological. Language provides the framework and lens through which humans interpret the world, while culture influences the values and meanings we attach to concepts and ideas. Our perceptions and interpretations of reality are thus subjective and deeply connected to our linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Heller & McElhinny, 2017; Whorf et al., 2012).

3.3 Being Perceived

To be a traveller, a voyeur, a perceiver of other places and people raises the question of who is doing the perceiving. Addressing both sides of this dynamic is necessary, as you cannot have one side of the subject/object dynamic without the other. This is especially relevant in a post-colonial world, where the traditional power dynamics are "obsolete". Those who once held power, who were once the voyeurs, the perceivers of objects, must now come to terms with a world in which they, too, are objects under surveillance, to be examined and analysed.

This metamorphosis can be unsightly. TIA's chapter, "Lollipop" provides an example of this: an ex-military man who upheld the apartheid regime is reduced to a character who no longer perceives and exerts, but is instead observed by others. His role has diminished, his social value has been reduced.

The irony of the situation is highlighted in the memoir; *Lollipop*'s is characterised by the use of multiple cultural reference points indicating that he is not what he presents himself to be. There is a poorly disguised predator before us to which all the evidentiary signs are pointing. It's very obvious, but I (the author) am the only one who seems to have perceived this; another example of struggling to grasp the true reality of a situation. If slightly satirically, the memoir discusses these complex actors; those left behind in an increasingly progressive society, those yearning for a bygone era, a traditional disciplinary society (as defined by Foucault).

Through historical hearsay, one can perhaps glean some insight from the alternative legend of how Alexander the Great was anointed with the courage to cut through the Gordian knot. Legend has it that his visit with an oracle featured her foretelling his success. The alternative version of this legend sees Alexander arrive when the temple is closed, requiring him to grab a local oracle by the arm and haul her up the hill towards the temple. She cries out "My lord, thou art indomitable!" Referencing only his inescapable grip and determination to bring her to the mountaintop. He receives her message, however, in a much broader sense; in grasping her, he has procured for himself greater meaning; by hook or by crook, he has acquired the grounds for which he can consider himself verifiably indomitable, unconquerable. Perception of oneself has a major impact on one's own behaviour, separate to any behavioural feedback loop created by societal perception.

3.4 Subjective Reality

Following the examination of the Perceiver and the Perceived, a more existential question is uncovered: is there any universal truth towards which all parties should strive? Does an objective reality exist beneath these complex layers of man-made perception? Is there a universal truth, an infallible reality waiting to be discovered? These questions - surrounding the subjectivity of reality - especially as they relate to travel - can one truly "know" or comprehend the reality of anyone else's lived experiences, especially in locales whose cultures and values are so fundamentally different to one's own?

Philosopher George Berkeley observed the increasing popularity of materialism and empiricism in the 18th century, and worried that these unfeeling, mechanical systems would lead to societal decay (Berkeley & Simon, 1907). He challenged these systems; per his view it was essential for the world to be supported by a more holistic, nuanced, humanistic structure. As Plato had argued with regards to objects being but facsimiles of more ideal forms (Plato & Jowett, 2008), Berkeley's rescue mission sought to remind us that the objects one perceives are also merely representations (Berkeley & Simon, 1907). Unlike Plato's, however, this newer theory posited that there was no overarching reality. No final truth which was being strived towards for

perpetuity (and, crucially, fruitlessly) (Berkeley & Simon, 1907). Our physical realities were little more than constantly shifting agglomerations of ideas and perceptions. Berkeley argued that the external world exists only insofar as it is perceived; in his *Principles of Human Knowledge* (1907), he argues that “esse est percipi:” to exist is to be perceived.

Though philosophical thought has progressed since the 18th century, Berkeley’s existential questions remain thought provoking. Central to his definition of perception is a disregard for material substance in the traditional sense. According to Berkeley, this tangible foundation, though seemingly intuitive and integral to contemporary theories of materialism, is unhelpful in our understanding of reality (Berkeley & Simon, 1907). He posits that objects hold no inherent value; their meaning derives solely from perception. *Ideas* are the entities that truly exist, and these only exist when perceived. As there is no evidence that the colours, shapes, and textures one senses correspond to a material reality, one must therefore conclude that these objects enjoy no independent experience outside our own minds.

Subjective idealism posits that our perceptions of reality are representations of objects; for example warm water may feel different based on one’s skin temperature. In subsequent centuries, as scientific theories honed their abilities to deliver empirical evidence for the continual existence of matter, as well as the laws governing it (physics, chemistry, and so on), Berkeley’s theories were placed under increasing duress.

To Berkeley, standardising idealism on a grand scale for all of society was untenable. The site of construction (for reality) needed to shift inward. His ideas helped lay the groundwork for modernity and were crucial to the Age of Enlightenment (Jones, 2021). The individual was now the moving part of society; the hierarchy of society - the rulers, aristocracy, the cultural cognoscente - used to be the agents. Berkeley proposed that, with his ideas, agency could be shifted lower down the ladder and now rest with the individual (Berkeley & Simon, 1907 p.35-37).

Berkeley’s abstract ideas remain relevant *today*; the proliferation of technology has meant the global population has been flooded with information, opinion, and propaganda, all of which shapes our respective realities as individuals.

These questions are broached, both explicitly and tangentially, at several points in *T.I.A.* - sometimes humorously. In one anecdote, trapped in a strange house with a group of volunteers considering taking hallucinogenic drugs, I begin anthropomorphizing certain of the terrifying artefacts on display, including a longer digression about an antelope head. This exemplifies that objects need data and interpretation to be perceived; this is necessarily unique and individualised. Thus, Berkeley’s arguments are germane: my reality, my human experience, is entirely shaped by my own mind. *T.I.A.* prompts the question, if it is possible to perceive the world, to have *any* experiences - to be human, *without* a filter? Are whatever warped and erroneous

perceptions we may have an inescapable facet of human existence? If so, then it is understandable that those who seek to gain power and influence would seek to shape our individual perceptions in the pursuit of creating a compliant, ideologically homogeneous populace.

In *The Republic* (2008), Plato proposes that a “Noble Lie” ought to be disseminated to the populace regarding each person’s potential (based on their social status) in order to create and maintain the ideal society. Each citizen has a designated role within the state, as determined by circumstances outside their control. This justifies the social hierarchy and benefits both the individual and the state by minimising social unrest and discord.

This concept raises obvious ethical and philosophical concerns; particularly the use of deception to achieve social harmony. Allowing the ruling class to employ dishonesty, poses a risk that trust will be undermined were the machinations of the strategy to be discovered by those being lied to. Additionally, his approach could be seen as attempting to legitimize an unequal society, prioritising the interests of the elite and assuming that their judgement regarding the welfare of the state and lives of their underlings ought to be given precedence.

By cementing individuals’ into their societal roles before birth, his proposal also explicitly discourages upward social mobility, implying that an individual’s capabilities are pre-determined (Plato & Jowett, 2008). This devalues the importance of family, education, surrounding society, and personal initiative as these factors relate to personal growth and development. It could be argued, however, that Plato presented these claims knowing that societal inequality was unavoidable; his Noble Lie was an attempt to mitigate the impending unrest that would develop among the subordinate class (Dombrowski, 2022).

To proactively address societal unrest, Plato sought to offer citizens with achievable aspirations, allowing each individual to perform their role at a high level of competency to maintain high morale. By offering each individual the chance to excel, this system sought to manipulate the manner in which self-perception impacts behaviour and emotional state (Dombrowski, 2022; Plato & Jowett, 2008).

3.4.1 The Proteus Effect

The Proteus Effect, as Nick Yee & Jeremy Bailenson define it, subjects “conform to the behaviour that they believe others would expect them to have,” (2007). The parasocial relationships cultivated by social media and the media at large have unforeseen consequences. Beyond the social feedback loop, they also posit the

existence of the “Proteus effect:” that users will behave differently in real life based on the perceptions of their online avatars.

As we choose our self-representations in virtual environments, our self-representations shape our behaviours in turn. These changes happen not over hours or weeks but within minutes... Although avatars are usually construed as something of our own choosing—a one-way process—the fact is that our avatars come to change how we behave (2007).

Users with "attractive" avatars demonstrated increased friendliness and agreeableness compared to those with "unattractive" avatars. The attractiveness of avatars influenced participants to engage in greater self-disclosure and approach opposite-gendered strangers within a minute. In a second study it was found that the height of their avatars impacted how confident participants became where the taller avatars were more willing to make unfair splits in negotiation tasks, and the shorter avatars were more likely to accept these terms. These findings highlight the immediate impact of avatars on digital behaviour. This effect was intuited and relied upon by Plato in his prescription of the Noble Lie. By assigning avatars at birth independent of the subjects' (citizens') individual realities, he could shape their self-perception, behaviour, and morale. This would be reinforced, by those occupying higher positions on the social hierarchy but, perhaps more crucially, also by those at equal and lower rankings.

Though its effects are most easily studied in social environments and interactions, Yee & Bailenson (2007) argue that these values take hold on a deeper level, and are observable even when the subject is alone: this is because self-perception theory is not predicated on the actual presence of other people but simply that a person evaluates themselves from a third-person perspective (i.e., an imagined third party).

With the advent of the internet, modes of communication and social interaction proliferated which did not require traditional face to face interaction (Elmer & Stadtfeld, 2020). In fact, anonymity became common - if not total anonymity, at least a meticulously curated public-facing profile. Users began to depict themselves in ways which were completely unrepresentative of their actual attributes (Elmer & Stadtfeld, 2020). These disguises extend beyond traditional behavioural loops, with significant effects observed when misrepresentative profile information (described as a user's “avatar”) is assigned at random.

Today, control is decentralised and nebulous. Ironically, like those ancient civilizations, the systems/actors revered and deified by Western consumers have no interest in the general population beyond their function as consumers; a topic discussed in *T.I.A.* at length: citizens sacrifice their privacy and attention anticipating rewards from these all-powerful forces (social media companies and their technocrat owners, for example). *T.I.A.* serves as a case study, delving into the experience of coexisting and navigating these control systems, examining the psychological and cultural challenges they pose. The symptoms and implications are thoroughly reflected upon.

The first chapters detail my first trip and lay the critical foundation for the sense of moral and cultural unease that resonates throughout the entire work. I broach the idea that even in its relatively nascent stages, social media had far more sinister ulterior motives than had been advertised to us. The dangers of unmoderated use - rampant for those raised with devices at hand - is highlighted by Johnathan Haidt & Graig Lukianoff (2019). Contrary to popular belief, post-2010 screen time, now encompassing internet capable devices and unrestricted social media access, is found to contribute significantly to an increase in “depression, anxiety, loneliness, dissatisfaction with life, self-harm, suicide attempts, and suicides,” (p.68).

The theme of distrust persists through TIA, suggesting technology’s potential sentience and prehensibility, notably explored in reflections on technology’s development in the 2010s. Shoshana Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2020) reinforces these notions by discussing the processes by which capitalism, with its rapacious appetite to extract value, no longer uses humans for their cheap labour, but now also mines their very existence - their behaviours, choices, preferences - for data. This agglomeration of information, users’ data exhaust, is used as actuarial data in the hunt for maximal data extraction by competing for users’ time, attention, opinions; insecurities and tempers are there to be provoked. The young and suggestible are at the mercy of these forces and can only work within these predefined boundaries, given the advent of targeted algorithms as discussed by Ferreira & Agante (2020). Social media platforms and targeted advertising present users with content that reinforces their existing beliefs, influencing behaviour and further reinforcing surveillance capitalism’s data profiles, whose profit-seeking drives these platforms to maximise data collection and user engagement (Zuboff, 2020).

My three trips between the US and South Africa underscored the perceptual gaps between individuals and the digital and physical realities surrounding them. The stark disparity between my subjective experience and the harsh realities within South Africa became evident during my first trip to Cape Town, working with other Americans and Western Europeans under the pretence of offering support. These dilemmas were compounded as the volunteers cycled in and out every few weeks, returning to their comfortable lives. Through this practice, countless do-gooders were thus allowed to carry with them in perpetuity their title of “saviour,” despite poverty and suffering not having decreased in any quantifiable way. The issues endure long after the visitors depart. Without our continual perception, famine, disease, and poverty are abstracted, becoming abstract concepts to be discussed and pontificated on.

As Berkeley initially sought to avert moral disaster, his subjective idealism might once more find relevance. With external, decentralised systems, exerting control and effortlessly altering our perceptions and self-perceptions in order to shape users into more efficient consumers, the locus of perception - the site of its construction - may need to be reconsidered.

3.5 Objective Truth

A discussion of homogeneity and commodified, standardised reality evokes the image of international McDonaldization, the idea that you can now find your favourite American burger in every corner of the world (Bryman, 2011). But, as I discover and discuss in TIA, travelling and navigating between various places and norms is not always seamless. In fact, it is in these gaps that bureaucracy and confusion flourish. The difficulties of navigating a world that simultaneously advocates hyper-individualism while evidently regarding citizens as disposable, leaving them to struggle to bridge disparate norms and reach for stability and consistency, is another theme of the memoir.

Certain norms and experiences are truly homogenised, and streamlined, while others are not. Two notable examples are my experiences getting a visa to allow my entry into South Africa, as well as the grades I received during my student exchange. I found myself mediating a bureaucratic impasse between my home university in the US and my exchange university in Stellenbosch. Despite satisfactory classwork and passing tests, the proprietary grading bell curve used in South Africa made it appear that I had failed. The Americans' baked-in perceptions of academic standards prevented them from respecting the South African system.

This theme resurfaces preceding my third and final trip to South Africa. The South Africans have complicated the process, *further*, introducing a risky and expensive X-ray test for tuberculosis.

To the visa agents, the objective truth - be it my tuberculosis status or a clean criminal record - is irrelevant. Their priority is exerting control for the sake of it (or, I jokingly suggest, profiting in some underhand way by forcing applicants to meet these arbitrary requirements).

3.5.1 Standardisation

In their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2020), Adorno & Horkheimer discuss the implications of the standardisation of society, where rationalisation and instrumental reasoning contribute to the erosion of individuality and freedom. Humans have become mere objects to be controlled and exploited. The Enlightenment's hyper-emphasis on efficiency has led to the domination of "instrumental reason" (Roach & Fluck, 2020). Today, society witnesses the reduction of everything to calculable and measurable quantities, resulting in the standardisation of education, work and mass culture. The imperative for maximum efficiency and minimum risk results in the homogenisation of individuals, eroding their uniqueness and creative spirit.

Particularly, the culture industry contributes to this societal erosion (Roach & Fluck, 2020). Driven by profit, the industry produces unoriginal and formulaic entertainment designed for the lowest common

intellectual and cultural denominator. This mass production not only limits individual expression and critical thought but also encourages conformity and complacency. The culture industry thus becomes a robust mechanism of social control, perpetuating the standardisation of desires, beliefs, and values.

Foucault's concepts of disciplinary societies and societies of control complement Adorno & Horkheimer's analysis by highlighting the mechanisms through which standardisation is enforced in contemporary society (2020). Foucault describes disciplinary societies as characterised by physical institutions such as prisons, schools, and factories that exert control through surveillance and discipline (Adorno & Bernstein, 2015; Foucault et al., 2000). These institutions enforce norms, hierarchies, and regulations that shape individual behaviour and ensure compliance with societal norms. Foucault anticipates a shift towards societies of control, where surveillance and discipline become more abstract and pervasive. In such societies, digital technologies and data collection enable constant monitoring and regulation. Social media, surveillance cameras, and algorithms facilitate the surveillance of individuals' behaviour, preferences, and interactions, leading to an unprecedented level of control over individuals' lives (Foucault et al., 2000).

3.5.2 Foucault

Foucault introduced the concept of disciplinary societies and later explored their transition into societies of control, marking a notable shift in the mechanisms of power and surveillance in modern societies. "Disciplinary Societies" suggests that, historically, the mechanisms of power were institutions like prisons, schools, hospitals, and factories (Foucault et al., 2000). These institutions used physical force and surveillance to regulate individuals, making them conform to societal norms and work within society's imbalanced power structures.

In these disciplinary societies, power operated through panoptic structures, where individuals are subjected to constant observation by authorities. Here, individuals internalise the gaze of the observer, leading to self-disciplining behaviours to avoid punishment and fit into established norms (Foucault, 2020). This internalisation of discipline creates docile bodies, as people adjust their behaviour. Self-regulation created by this "panopticon" is vital, for genuine, individualized surveillance was a highly impractical suggestion. Instead, the illusion of constant surveillance was found to be more than effective in terms of ensuring the subjects' conformity (Foucault et al., 2000).

The shift to "societies of control" requires changes in power dynamics; advancements in digital technologies and information systems, as well as the proliferation of late capitalism (which was often enabled to

spread under the guise of democratic values) (Foucault et al., 2000; Foucault, 2020). Instead of centralised, physical institutions featured in disciplinary societies, control now operates through decentralised and digital mechanisms.

The focus is no longer (solely) on physical spaces like prisons or factories but extends to virtual spaces as well. Users are subject to constant monitoring and analysis (as discussed by Zuboff's *Surveillance Capitalism* (2020)).

The transition from disciplinary societies to societies of control aligns with Adorno & Horkheimer's concerns (Adorno & Bernstein, 2015). Today, standardisation becomes even more pervasive; the information age enables the manipulation of individual subjectives. The homogenisation of desires, consumer interests, and political opinions is intensified through the digital media landscape, reinforcing conformity and stifling critical thought.

The loss of individuality and autonomy in the face of mass culture, instrumental reason, and pervasive surveillance challenges the essence of human freedom and agency. Furthermore, the standardisation of society perpetuates social hierarchies and inequalities, hindering disempowered groups from challenging norms and structures.

Adorno & Horkheimer call for critical engagement and resistance against these forces of standardisation and control (Adorno & Bernstein, 2015). Acknowledging the impact of mass culture, instrumental reason, and surveillance, empowers us to reclaim individuality and our right to critical thought, and challenge the standardising tendencies of contemporary society. Adorno & Horkheimer's analysis of the standardisation of society, complemented by Foucault's ideas on disciplinary societies and societies of control, offer an examination of the challenges posed by modernity and the erosion of individuality and freedom (Adorno & Bernstein, 2015; Foucault, 2020).

This societal shift has its own implications regarding users' autonomy and identity. Previously, in disciplinary societies, power was more visible; individuals were aware of the disciplinary mechanisms which exerted control over them. Today, societies of control operate far more surreptitiously, making it nearly impossible for individuals to register - let alone comprehend the extent of - these mechanisms and their influence (Foucault et al., 2000).

Individuals today are subject to profiling and classification based on their digital footprints. This profiling shapes the information and opportunities individuals are exposed to, creating "echo chambers." As a result, autonomy and decision-making may be subtly influenced or constrained by the algorithms and data-driven environments they encounter (RamHormozi, 2019).

Foucault does not make a value judgement, arguing that, because this newly-developed society of control has not yet reached its final version, there is not yet a definitive conclusion to be drawn. Nevertheless, citizens must remain on the lookout for “new weapons” of critique and continue to engage with the products of the Western culture industry, and these other influences, with scepticism (Foucault et al., 2000).

In *T.I.A.*, however, I argue that, in light of developments regarding climate change, there may not be time to sit passively as these mechanisms are allowed to run their course; intervention may be needed.

3.6 Standardisation to *Dividuation*: *Deleuze*

Critical analysis and comprehensive assessment of one’s surroundings is crucial. Turning to Deleuze, who analysed the culture industry, which has had an outsized impact on shaping subjective realities. Unlike traditional standardisation, modern approaches encourage diverse behaviour, as this gives fuel to the surveillance economy, termed “*dividuation*”, as defined by Deleuze (Deleuze & Tomlinson, 2009).

Foucault's concept of societies of control, implicitly explored in his later works, highlights the shift from disciplinary mechanisms to more decentralized and digitised forms of control (Deleuze & Tomlinson, 2009). Here, power operates through continuous digital surveillance and data collection; an untraceable network of control. Individuals' behaviour, preferences, and interactions undergo constant monitoring and analysis. The proliferation of data and algorithms shapes the information individuals receive, potentially standardising and manipulating individual subjectivities (Deleuze & Tomlinson, 2009).

Dividuation does not signify the triumph of individuality but rather the process of being fragmented, shaped, and “pre-determined” by societal forces. Deleuze argued that in a highly structured and commodified world, individuals tend to conform to external pressures, leading to a loss of authentic self-determination and individuality. The emphasis on instrumental reason and mass culture contributes to the standardisation of desires and behaviours, hindering genuine dividuation. However, by allowing the individual to experience a (sanctioned) form of individuality, any suspicion that citizens’ freedoms have been eroded is suppressed.

Freedom is offered in the form of consumer discretion, which suits all parties. This pseudo-dividuation, he posits, is a bad-faith provision by the system of control (not dissimilar to the Noble Lie) which guarantees the subjects remain unaware and docile:

By pseudo-dividuation we mean endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market [sic] on the basis of standardisation itself. standardisation of song hits keeps the customers in line doing their thinking for them, as it were. Pseudo-dividuation, for its part, keeps

them in line by making them forget that what they listen to is wholly intended for them or predigested (Andrae, 2005).

Even the most thought-provoking products are still only products; those who enjoy them still only consumers. The connection between Foucault's societies of control and Deleuze's concept of dividuation lies in their shared concern about the impact of modernity on individual subjectivity (Andrae, 2005; Foucault et al., 2000). Both philosophers reflect on how contemporary societies tend to reduce the complexity of human beings and stunt their personal growth. In societies of control, the proliferation of surveillance and data-driven environments can further erode individual autonomy. From Adorno's perspective, the commodification and standardisation of culture contribute to the fragmentation of the self (Andrae, 2005).

Dividuation is a response to the processes of standardisation and manipulation inherent in societies of control. Deleuze emphasises the importance of resisting the tide of homogenisation caused by modernity and advocates for preserving genuine individuality and self-determination (Deleuze & Tomlinson, 2009).

Foucault's societies of control and Deleuze's concept of dividuation address the challenges faced by individuals in maintaining agency within today's society (Deleuze & Tomlinson, 2009; (Foucault, 2020). Both men emphasise the relationship between power, identity, and agency/freedom in the modern world, while discussing the challenges (and possibilities) for genuine dividuation and self-determination in the face of insidious control mechanisms and standardised culture.

Again, these topics are covered in TIA. Specifically through the lens of someone who was brought up in an online world and pushed through a bloated, outdated education system. Younger generations have drawn the short straw: the looting has already happened, the land has been grabbed; they are forced into a constant state of exhaustion and subsistence - financially and intellectually - while older, wealthier generations watch on (Francioli et al., 2023). They [the younger generations] are thus kept in limbo, with no hope of escape, no future to which they can look forward. Here, the work of Mark Fisher is salient, discussing this pandemic of hopelessness, disenchantment, disillusion (Fisher, 2022).

The deeper struggle is what my time in South Africa was meant to be; who goes on these types of trips? What do they accomplish? What will I get out of it? This unease eventually also affects me back in the US. This struggle - reaching towards a future which does not reach back - is discussed at length.

3.7 Millennial Precarity

Following the collapse of the housing market young people no longer have a clear path forward. Lack of any safety net, the erosion of the social contract, and an uncooperative older generation and wealthy upper class

have shattered the promise of a future where anything was possible. The once-assured upward social mobility is nearly impossible due to the lack of a stable foundation. Extortionately priced college degrees, now a prerequisite, offer little optimism amid unchecked inflation and growing general wealth inequality. This economic downturn, along with the subsequent social disconnect occurs, exacerbating feelings of despondence and disenfranchisement - a recurring theme Fisher terms “millennial precarity” (Fisher, 2022).

As I describe Pennsylvania (my home state) early on in the book, I begin to suspect that the prevailing social and economic norms would be impossible for me. I mention that, even after graduating university, there remained a nagging suspicion that I was no closer to happiness despite being (ostensibly) more prepared for the “real world.” Despite playing by their rules, I nevertheless still found myself eligible only for minimum wage jobs, keeping me just above the poverty line.

Fisher summarised this feeling well, placing it in a broader, more hopeless societal context, in his essay “Good For Nothing” (2021):

For some time now, one of the most successful tactics of the ruling class has been responsabilisation. Each individual member of the subordinate class is encouraged into feeling that their poverty, lack of opportunities, or unemployment, is their fault and their fault alone. Individuals will blame themselves rather than social structures, which in any case they have been induced into believing do not really exist (they are just excuses, called upon by the weak)(pp.6).

What Smail calls ‘magical voluntarism’ – the belief that it is within every individual’s power to make themselves whatever they want to be – is the ideology and unofficial religion of contemporary capitalist society, pushed by reality TV ‘experts’ and business gurus as much as by politicians (Smail, 2001).

Magical voluntarism is both an effect and a cause of the currently historically low level of class consciousness... A particularly vicious double bind is imposed on the long-term unemployed in the UK now: a population that has all its life been sent the message that it is good for nothing is simultaneously told that it can do anything it wants to do (Fisher, 2021 pp.6).

Fisher also touches on this in “Ghosts of My Life,” in which he references the concept of *hauntology* (2022). Coined by Jacques Derrida, hauntology suggests that the progression and development of society and culture have stalled (2011). Historically, different eras and epochs were clearly delineated and evolution was evident. Today, however, high-speed communication and proliferation of devices allow for a constant feedback loop (Fisher, 2022). These tools are driven by an economic system which prioritises profit over all else and disincentivizes creative and economic risk. The past has become the only vein deemed worthwhile to mine. Inherent to this argument is the conclusion that our future has thus been compromised by these systems, forcing

consumers to live in a cultural limbo wherein the “new” is little more than the profitable, trustworthy old touched up by modern technology (Fisher, 2022).

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy and its values (including the free market) had triumphed, thus marking the end of major global ideological conflict (*The end of history and the last man* 2020). Cape Town’s segment of the Berlin Wall is referenced in TIA, alluding to the idea that, despite its collapse, the promising future has not been realized in South Africa. The spread of liberal values would create a virtuous cycle, encouraging countries with previously incompatible belief systems to pursue peace and cooperation so as to enjoy the fruits of a prosperous, globalizing economy.

With the proliferation of technology, however, and the subsequent rise of surveillance capitalism and societies of control, it could be argued that Fukuyama’s claims failed to account for the impending challenges presented by late capitalism (Adorno & Bernstein, 2015). The erosion of the self, an intentional byproduct of an economic system that views its participants as replaceable and merely agglomerations of data, as well as the deterioration of culture has left the landscape of individual self-expression a bleak one. As highlighted by Baudrillard (1998) & Fisher (2015), modern cinema, art, and music have combined with overarching power structures to stunt critical thought - and prevent action - on any meaningful scale. With this complacency comes the erosion of Enlightenment values; among them self-awareness, personal autonomy, freedom of thought, expression, and political engagement. Fisher’s ideas are adjacent to those suggested by Jean Baudrillard in “The End of the Millennium” (1998):

The work of history has ceased to function... The work of mourning is beginning. The information system is taking over the baton from History and starting to produce the event in the same way that Capital is starting to produce Work, so that labour has no significance of its own, just as the event produced by information has no historical meaning of its own (p.8).

The information system, Baudrillard argues, exercises control, meaning even those individuals seeking enlightenment or self-actualization are still shepherded into the confines of the persistently mediated modern world. Online personas - anonymous or not - permit modification - if not a complete fabrication of the perceived self (Baudrillard & Turner, 1995). Social media, with its granular analysis of user reception received through quantified data, allows users’ to curate and adjust our facades with equal precision. This adjustment is driven by the pursuit of positive affirmations and the cultivation of larger, more loyal followings (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2019).

The ubiquity of these virtual tools forces us to all but abandon any illusions of avoiding them altogether. Participation in society and culture requires a non-zero degree of concession. As such, the question of whether citizens *should* use these tools is moot; the question is how these tools can be used for maximum good. Especially prescient here are Baudrillard's comments regarding symbols and simulacra; e.g.: "Copies that depict things that either had no original to begin with, or that no longer have an original. (Baudrillard, 1994.)" With digital marketing, AI, etc. only continuing to grow in capability, users/consumers are more susceptible than ever before to the challenge of finding and experiencing objective reality and truth. Increasingly, symbols and simulacra are now so indiscernible from reality that the human brain is often unable to discern between them; the social and psychological corrosion this causes is then exploited by corporations to drive hyper-individualism, consumerism, etc. Even the way in which humans interface with each other has been corrupted; participants in the digital world are all but *incentivised* to curate a false - or at least heavily curated - identity. This raises the question of our chronic usage of/dependence on these devices/tools.

3.7.1 Tools

This question is not without historical precedent. Humans, as Timothy Taylor argues in "The Artificial Ape" (2010), are unique in that we can credit much of our evolution to the tools we have created. We have always been reliant on the technology around us. Our inventions have enabled us to survive and flourish under circumstances that might otherwise have killed us - this, in turn, leads to intra-species diversity and further innovation. Taylor argues that technology (however crude) is the main reason our species, in our current form, was able to proliferate:

Upright female hominins walking the savannah had a real problem: their babies couldn't cling to them the way a chimp baby could cling to its mother. Carrying an infant would have been the highest drain on energy for a hominin female – higher than lactation. So what did they do? I believe they figured out how to carry their newborns using a loop of animal viscera... Once you have slings to carry babies, you have broken a glass ceiling – it doesn't matter whether the infant is helpless for a day, a month or a year. You can have ever more helpless young (pp.4).

However, while technology has advanced exponentially, human biology has not kept pace. It should therefore come as no surprise that we once again find ourselves at the mercy of the tools we have created. Humans are therefore bringing stone-age tools to the technological gunfight; our technologies, allowing for instant connection and feedback from millions of others around the world, now force users' to solve problems for which we lack the means to do so (Taylor, 2010).

These systems have mutated and spread so rapidly that users' are left grasping for meaning, attempting to overlay our rudimentary heuristics onto impossibly complicated and ever-expanding social ecosystems. Social tools which might have been adaptive 10,000 years ago now hinder us. Our [humans'] innate dependence on dopamine and validation is now preyed on. We do not yet know the consequences of these innovations, nor of phenomena like the aforementioned Proteus Effect - more of which will undoubtedly be discovered and subsequently exploited (Yee & Bailenson, 2007). I address this in TIA, as well as the frustration I felt as both a witness to and participant in this dynamic. With Wanderlust and philanthropy having been commodified (the memoir posits), and the vast majority of other volunteers - and, in my two subsequent trips, students - being regular users of social media, the possibility that Yee & Bailenson's Proteus effect was evidenced is also suggested in the work. Young people, disenfranchised and disillusioned by the culturally stagnating and financially crippling developed countries they were visiting South Africa from, were thus able to reinvent themselves - with the help of social media and a friendly exchange rate - as the philanthropists and/or decadent world travelers they hoped to be perceived.

3.8 Disneyization: The Sameness of Experience Worldwide

It is little wonder these [mostly North American] volunteers arrived with such lofty aspirations. As mainstream media devolves (as alleged by Fisher, Baudrillard, et al), so too do users' attention spans and their collective awareness/consciousness. Experiences are homogenised and controlled, while our identities are moulded by idealised versions of happiness and success as promulgated from relentless cultural propaganda.

This is also explored in the memoir: researching the world of "volun-tourism", a supposedly benevolent sphere that I was to discover was no less immune to market forces than any other. This realisation leads to another discussion of prehensibility; expressing my misgivings regarding this type of travel commodified by the internet and social media, co-opting the desire all but copyrighting "Wanderlust" as a marketable aesthetic.

Here, we reference Alan Bryman's "The Disneyization of Society" (2011), Disney's cultural monopoly on the Western world has been pervasive; every aspect of consumers' lives is curated on their behalf - they [the consumers] are told what to think and to believe. Deleuze also explains this arguing that, in the post-war era, cinema underwent a seismic shift: time was no longer subordinated to action and "movement;" the opposite was now true (Deleuze & Tomlinson, 2009). Previously, characters would perceive things, be affected by those things, and subsequently take action. Perhaps in unconscious rebellion of these developments (or because they hoped to take the path of least resistance towards attaining social credit), many volunteers wistfully overlaid this more traditional, conventional lens when it came to their time in South Africa.

As Deleuze argues, this somewhat simplistic, chronologic chain of events, is governed by the “sensory-motor schema” - it tends toward mirroring reality, at least in terms of conventional behaviour: baby sees apple, gets hungry, reaches for and attains apple. Likewise, a volunteer sees poverty, spends a week feeding orphans to resolve poverty, whereupon he attains inner peace (Deleuze & Tomlinson, 2009). Unfortunately, this rudimentary, linear schema, featuring a satisfying payoff for the character (and, today, their respective audience back home) proved impossible to mimic.

As Deleuze says, “the post-war period has greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces we no longer know how to describe.” Increasingly, then, citizens are brought into contact with “any-spaces-whatever:” (2009, ch.14) these places that are deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction. This is evident on the domestic front, but also for those who decide to travel; the sprawling townships covering so many square miles of South African land exemplify Deleuze’s point, and, though the characters around me were only acting out imaginary narratives, served as a perfect example of these settings that serve only to create a sense of unease, indecision, and inaction; a backdrop against which characters can only feign agency, but in fact are forced to sit with time, reflect, stew, fester, and sift through it for consolation and answers.

Deleuze’s assertions have proved true in the context of TIA’s potential publication. Today, there is a specific framework that any aspiring author must follow: less emphasis is placed on the work itself than on the author’s brand, image, and marketing strategy. The author must commodify themselves by curating an online presence, creating a website to promote the work and threading additional themes and characters to cater to specific audiences (whose needs and literary prowess have been identified by publishers and editors to sell more, and narrow their interests neatly into their prescribed personalities). These requirements lead authors to strive for compliance in order to be published, while simultaneously forcing readers into the same conformity.

As volunteers, any good-faith assessment of our surroundings and role made clear that meaningful solutions were not going to be readily available. (Not least because none of this, of course, is conducive to those looking for easy moral gratification.) *T.I.A.* also argues that Westerners’ ignorance of the outside world - and our subsequent misguided attempts to save it - are an intended consequence, as they allow us to engage in activism and resistance and non-conformity, and reap the social benefits, without ever actually threatening the status quo. Alas, our state- and culturally-sanctioned perceptions of the outside world are not only misguided, but potentially harmful. TIA sheds light on the quandary in which aspiring activists find themselves; I suggest that the West’s obsession with interventionism at the micro level abroad distracts and even prevents its citizens from registering and confronting the very real threats facing us on the domestic front.

4. Conclusion

Humans are driven - and often hindered - by our longing for attention, validation, and belonging. Alas, these innate natural desires are being exploited for profit and to our great detriment - socially, psychologically, etc. Participation in a globalised, digital society requires that we forfeit our privacy and personal resources. Anyone hoping to learn about themselves and find their place in the world, cannot do so without paying a price in that regard. By the time citizens realise the extent to which they have been impacted by these forces (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2019), it may be too late.

This dilemma leads us to a more meta-level paradox; despite that I, the author of TIA, am aware of these pernicious forces, and am discomfited by the requirement of sacrificing one's privacy in the pursuit of validation from others, I nevertheless find myself having written a book about my experience and reflections, and must participate in this exchange to at least some extent if I want to be financially viable: I, as an aspiring author, must be willing to thrust myself onstage in order to successfully market this book to potential publishers and, hopefully, customers. I must also construct and maintain a curated online presence. Although I can control the content of the book, I cannot control its reception, nor which passages or insights will resonate with which people; I must cede control to forces beyond my own influence. To a certain degree, of course, this is inescapable in any case where one records their thoughts and feelings to be read and analysed by others. But in the modern world, it seems one must be willing to bare all in the name of attracting interest; it is a race to the bottom, one in which all citizens/consumers are incentivised to participate.

Ironically, a project that started out with the author visiting another country with the sole intent of reporting what he saw, has mutated; I am forced to also be on show. Perhaps the former was never possible; today, this is the cost of any creative endeavour (barring exceptional circumstances). In this regard, there is an allegorical note to the project, (which, at this time, remains ongoing): the binary of voyeur and viewed, subject and object, is a thing of the past. There is no longer a clear distinction between these groups. As that divide has eroded however, so have the walls between work and leisure. Likewise those between freedom and servitude, earnestness and cynicism, activism and consumerism, art and advertisement. Is this new paradigm any better?

Bibliography

- Adorno, T.W. & Bernstein, J.M. 2015. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Aguirre-Celis, N. & Miikkulainen, R. 2021. *Understanding the semantic space: How word meanings dynamically adapt ...* Available: <https://aclanthology.org/2021.sem-space-1.1.pdf> [2023, November 30].
- Andrae, T. 2005. *Jump cut a review of Contemporary Media*. Available: <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC20folder/AdornoMassCult.html> [2023, December 01].
- Baudrillard, J., 1994. *Simulacres et simulation: Simulacra and simulation: the body in theory*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan.
- Baudrillard, J. & Turner, C. 1995. *The illusion of the end*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Baudrillard, J. 1998. The end of the Millennium or the countdown. *Theory, Culture & Society*. 15(1):1–9. DOI: 10.1177/026327698015001001.
- Berkeley, G. & Simon, C. 1907. *The principles of human knowledge: A treatise on the nature of the material substance and its relation to the absolute*. London, NY,.
- Botton, D.A. 2014. *The Art of Travel*. London: Penguin Books.
- Bryman, A. 2011. *The disneyization of society*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.
- Bryson, B. 1995. *Notes from a Small Island*. New York, NY: William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publisher.
- Bryson, B. 1997. *A Walk in the Woods*. London, UK: Doubleday.
- Bryson, B. 2001. *Neither here nor there: Travels in Europe*. New York, NY: William Morrow.
- Coates, T.-N. 2023. *The case for reparations*. Atlantic Media Company. Available: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/> [2023, November 29].

- Conrad, J., Knowles, O. & Hampson, R. 2007. *Heart of darkness*. London: Penguin Books.
- Deleuze, G. & Tomlinson, H. 2009. *Cinema*. London: Continuum.
- Derrida, J. & Kamuf, P. 2011. *Specters of Marx: The State of the debt, the work of mourning, and the New International*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Dombrowski, D.A. 2022. Rawls and Plato: The noble lie and social contract theory. *Pre-Liberal Political Philosophy*. 7–40. DOI: 10.1163/9789004520271_003.
- Elmer, T. & Stadtfeld, C. 2020. Depressive symptoms are associated with social isolation in face-to-face interaction networks. *Scientific Reports*. 10(1). DOI: 10.1038/s41598-020-58297-9.
- Ferreira, Michelly & Agante, Luisa. 2020. The Use of Algorithms to Target Children while Advertising on YouTube Kids Platform: A reflection and analysis of the existing regulation.
- Fisher, M. 2021. “*Good for nothing*” - Mark Fisher. Available: <https://libcom.org/article/good-nothing-mark-fisher> [2023, December 01].
- Fisher, M. 2022a. *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* Alresford, Hampshire, UK: Zero Books.
- Fisher, M. 2022b. *Ghosts of my life: Writings on depression, Hauntology and lost futures*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books.
- Flaxman, G. 2000. *The brain is the screen: Deleuze and the philosophy of cinema*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.
- Foucault, M. 2020. *Ethics: Subjectivity and truth*. PENGUIN Books. Available: <https://www.amazon.com/Ethics-Subjectivity-Essential-Foucault-1954-1984/dp/1565844343> [2023, December 01].

- Foucault, M., Rabinow, P. & Hurley, R. 2000. *Essential works of Foucault, 1954-1984. Subjectivity and truth*. London: Penguin.
- Francioli, S., Danbold, F., North, M. 2023. *Millennials Versus Boomers: An Asymmetric Pattern of Realistic and Symbolic Threats Drives Intergenerational Tensions in the United States*. Psychology Bulletin.
- Fukuyama, F. 2020. *The end of history and the last man*. UK: Penguin Books.
- Haidt, J. & Lukianoff, G. 2019. *The coddling of the American mind*. London: Penguin Books.
- Heller, M. & McElhinny, B.S. 2017. *Language, capitalism, colonialism: Toward a critical history*. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press.
- Horkheimer, M., Adorno, T.W., Jephcott, E. & Noeri, G.S. 2020. *Dialectic of enlightenment*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Jerome, J.K. 1952. *Three men in a boat*. Bielefeld: Velhagen & Klasing.
- Jones, T. 2021. *George Berkeley: A philosophical life*. Princeton (N. J.): Princeton University Press.
- Mills, H.L. 2017. Avatar creation: The Social Construction of “Beauty” in second life. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. 95(3):607–624. DOI: 10.1177/1077699017722105.
- Moore-Gilbert, B. 2005. Western autobiography and Colonial Discourse: The case of Rousseau’s “orientalism”. *Social Identities*. 11(4):301–314. DOI: 10.1080/13504630500356314.
- N.d.
- Noah, T. 2016. *Born a Crime*. London: Random House.
- Orwell, G. 1986. *1984*. Palermo: Aesthetica Edizioni.

- Palin, M., Ellingham, M., Florence, P. & Rogerson, B. 2011. *Oxtravels: Meetings with remarkable travel writers*. London: Profile Books.
- Plato & Jowett, B. 2008. *Plato: The republic*. Charleston, SC: Forgotten Books.
- RamHormozi, H. 2019. *The Anatomy of Consumerism: The Story of excess, greed, self-indulgence, wealth accumulation, insurmountable waste and Environmental degradation*. Victoria: Friesenpress.
- Roach, S.C. & Fluck, M. 2020. 10. Instrumental Reason. In *Handbook of Critical International Relations*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Said, E.W. 2021. *Orientalism*. London, UK: Penguin.
- Sen, A.K. 2001. *Development as freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smail, D.J. 2001. *The nature of unhappiness*. London: Robinson.
- Taylor, T. 2010. *The artificial ape how technology changed the course of human evolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Theroux, P. 1995. *The pillars of hercules: A grand tour of the Mediteranean*. London: Hamilton.
- Theroux, P. 2011. *Dark Star safari: Overland from Cairo to Cape Town*. London: Penguin.
- Theroux, P. 2014. *The last train to Zona Verde: Overland from Cape Town to Angola*. London: Penguin Books.
- UNDP. 2023. *Singapore*. Available: https://data.humdata.org/dataset/hdro-data-for-singapore?force_layout=desktop [2023, November 30].
- Varghese, M. 2020. Precarity and millennial apathy. *A Brief History of Creative Work and Plutonomy*. 3–10. DOI: 10.1007/978-981-15-9263-8_1.
- Wainaina, B. 2020. *How to write about Africa*. Available: <https://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/> [2023, November 30].

- Wallace, D.F. 2005. *Consider the lobster: Essays and arguments*. London: Abacus.
- Wallace, D.F. 2013. *A supposedly fun thing I'll never do again: Essays and arguments*. London: Abacus.
- Whorf, B.L., Carroll, J.B., Levinson, S.C. & Lee, P. 2012. *Language, thought, and reality selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Woosnam, K.M., Draper, J., Jiang, J. (Kelly), Aleshinloye, K.D. & Erul, E. 2018. Applying self-perception theory to explain residents' attitudes about tourism development through travel histories. *Tourism Management*. 64:357–368. DOI: 10.1016/j.tourman.2017.09.015.
- Yee, N. & Bailenson, J. 2007. The proteus effect: The effect of transformed self-representation on behavior. *Human Communication Research*. 33(3):271–290. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2958.2007.00299.x.
- Zuboff, S. 2020. *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs.

THIS IS AFRICA

A MEMOIR

JACK RATHMELL

Copyright © Jack Rathmell 2023

All rights reserved.

This version is solely for examination by University of Cape Town, Centre for Film and Media. No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the author, except as permitted by U.S. and U.K. copyright law.

Photography by Jack Rathmell and Sophie Rathmell
Artwork by Claudia Everest

CONTENTS

Welcome	vii
ACT ONE	
1. The Seeds of Discontent <i>or: FOMO Fatigue</i>	3
2. Rush Week	15
3. Nature	21
4. Bone Appetit	29
5. Bafana Bafana	33
6. T.Í.A.	38
7. Road Trip	49
8. Might Makes Right	79
9. Scrambling for Answers (or maybe just excuses)	92
10. Man versus Wild	103
11. Brotherly Love	114
12. Bitter/sweet	121
13. Debrief	127
ON LOCATION	139
ACT TWO	
14. Red Tape	157
15. Fees Must Fall	170
16. Newlands <i>(Old-habits)</i>	179
17. Cosa Nostra <i>(ou, si tu prefers, "Notre Chose")</i>	183
18. Rocking the Daisies	189
19. Pipe Bomb	195
20. Fauna	202
21. Renaissance Man <i>or: Public Indecency</i>	206

22. Showdown	234
<i>or: The Apple Doesn't Fall Far</i>	
23. Respite	244

ACT THREE

24. Happy Ending (?)	261
25. Look Around	274
<i>or: The Panopticon</i>	
26. Everything Happens for a Reason	294
<i>or: T.I. Apocrypha</i>	

Notes	303
Acknowledgments	305
Untitled	307
Untitled	309

WELCOME

This book documents my experience as a young man from middle class, white America who, somewhat improbably, ended up spending two years (in total) in South Africa before the age of 25.

My first visit (of the eventual three) as a 19-year-old was only a few months long, yet was arguably the most formative. Fed up with university and the imminent school-to-rat-race pipeline, I decided to distance myself. I picked South Africa as a destination, albeit not for any deeper reason than its sheer novelty. At this point, I lack a nuanced understanding of the ethical dilemmas regarding foreign aid, of Western imperialism, of problematic Orientalist attitudes, and so on; I was just a young man trying to have an “adventure.” As I prepare for and embark on the trip, however, I begin to realize the extent and complexity of the socio-cultural and political factors at play. South Africa, albeit a beautiful (and in many regards a tourist friendly) country, has serious systemic problems of its own, which make traveling to and living in the country a challenge - in a material sense but also an ethical one (especially as a white, privileged male). I struggle to reconcile these glaring conflicts - especially when they are contrasted against the behaviors and attitudes of the oblivious, hedonistic volunteers. Nevertheless, I develop a deep affection for the country and

decide to go back. I do so twice more, doubling the length of my stay each time: the second trip is six months, spent as a visiting undergrad at Stellenbosch University.

In 2017, as the political system and public discourse devolved with the ascendance of Trump, I now realize that there is no place I truly feel at home, no place I feel truly at ease. Between trips to South Africa, I find myself increasingly disenchanted with the US. This sense worsens as I approach (and eventually cross) the finish-line of my academic career. My third trip took place in 2019 and was spent as a master's student at UCT. Over the course of this year and following my return home, I now realize the suspicions I've had over the past few years are not unfounded. Young people have been sold a false dream: we find ourselves in tens - and often hundreds - of thousands of dollars in debt, with job prospects scant, and very little opportunity for not only upward social mobility but for simply escaping the exhausting, soul-sucking loop of renting with no hope of ever owning a house of our own - even having a family. Meanwhile, our older generations (whose success, in many cases, is simply a product of being born in the right place at the right time) continue to accumulate and hoard wealth, while labeling young people as lazy, reckless, and entitled.

Throughout the book, I recount many personal anecdotes detailing the frustrating, problematic, and confusing beliefs with which we're indoctrinated. I poke fun at our selfishness, shortsightedness, laziness, and hypocrisy, but remain self-deprecating, cynical, and sardonic. At times, I exaggerate my "character" as the naïve, blasé, hyper-patriotic frat boy, jock, or wannabe CEO. Although this means certain passages take on a seemingly whimsical, flippant, or over-the-top voice, the underlying themes and sentiments are very serious and intentional.



On that note, a quick word on the title. *This is Africa* isn't just a technically true statement about the setting of the book. It's also a

reference to a direct quote I heard countless times during my visits there - my first one, in particular. I'm not sure if it's used anywhere else in Africa, but in South Africa "This is Africa" is often thrown around as a sort of "Oh well. It is what it is" or a "Ha. What did you expect?"-esque consolation or rationalization for any frustrating or confusing thing you experience. This sounds pretty imprecise, I know, but that's because the platitude can be used in a broad array of contexts:

Your commute gets delayed by 45 minutes because there's a troupe of baboons blocking the road?

Don't look so surprised; This is Africa.

Have to set down your basket full of groceries while you're trying to shop for your family because the scheduled four-hour-long power cut just kicked in?

You and everybody else, pal. This is Africa.

I should add that it wasn't used from a place of bitterness or hostility, but rather a sort of resigned acceptance. It was a reminder to go with the flow, and to recalibrate your expectations as to how long things should take and how well they should work. It's a way of coming to terms with the hard truth that the world doesn't revolve around you, which, as it happens, is a belief we get particularly accustomed to having in the US, what with our cult of individualism and our strict adherence to guiding principles like "the customer is always right." Sure enough, our frustrations back home, like getting stuck at the DMV or whatever, are the exception to the general rule. And so this, as much as anything else, can be a culture shock for those of us arriving to a place like South Africa.

The book has loads of examples of my run-ins with the spirit of "This is Africa." In some, I come out on top. In others, I walk away soundly beaten. All this would have made the title apt enough. But it gets better:

As you'll learn (I hope), part-way through my first trip I began to notice that the volunteers had started using the phrase too, to justify all sorts of questionable behavior, even though the

things *they* were doing had nothing to do with where we happened to be living.

So I appreciate that angle, too: *This is Africa* being co-opted by us (white, western European) volunteers at our convenience to justify our own selfishness, hypocrisy, depravity, etc.

I also kind of *like* that the title doesn't name South Africa specifically. This makes it a nod to how we, in places like the US and the UK, are all but taught to think of Africa as both a continent as well as a singular, unified country. (Sort of like a bigger, scarier Australia, or something.)

So I like that the title plays on this monolith thing. Plus, if you separate it from the self-aware platitude, you can interpret it just as a self-satisfied, pith-hatted explorer upon his return home: "Hear ye: I have returned from my foray into the uncharted lands and have summarized it thus..." *This* irony is nice, too, because it becomes abundantly clear within just a few pages how conflicted and frustrated I am regarding the issues discussed in the book: in our globalized, digital world, *everything* is so complex, so opaque, and carries so much inherent contradiction that it feels impossible, as an individual, to find and implement objective truth.



T.I.A. concludes with an extensive examination of our flawed perceptions and attitudes - especially as they relate to countries like South Africa. I also critique our toxic attitudes towards work, productivity, rational self-interest and "self-reliance" affect how we perceive and interact with each other and the rest of the world. I seek answers for why Westerners feel the need to engage in activities like voluntourism, while our own countries - and our very planet - are facing imminent existential threat.

That said, below are a few excerpts from the book's final section: hard-won reflections drawn from my somewhat tumultuous, haphazard half-decade spent between these two fascinating countries, trying to figure out not just my place in the world but

what's actually going on out there and if I even *want* to participate. But is this moot? I wonder. Do I, or any of us, really have a choice? Can we actually make a difference, or must we resign ourselves to being helpless bystanders?



We, in our strange little Western bubble, have cranked our hedonic treadmill up to maximum speed and can thus no longer make sense of anything else. From up in our crow's nest, poverty has become a binary distinction: you're either with us or far, far, below. From an angle this steep, it's impossible for us to relativize what's happening on lower rungs; it all looks pretty much the same (to wit: horrific). Of course, our belief that there's a clear delineation between the haves and have-nots - and that any such list would be neatly organized by country or region - is itself erroneous. At any rate, the result is that most of us can't really conceive of other places being able to achieve happiness without first acquiescing to our systems and values. It's incomprehensible that another country might provide its citizens with an equal or better quality of life. We might say we can, but we can't *really* wrap our heads around the idea that someone being middle class in, say, Bangladesh, might have an equal or better chance of having a happy life than a poor person in Kentucky.

Not letting our ignorance get in the way of a good story, we nevertheless continue to smugly label these other places as plutocracies, oligarchies, and corporatocracies, scolding them for corruption, crony capitalism, dirty capitalism, racketeering and rent-seeking, while pontificating about our virtuous neoliberal values. When will we realize that these semantic distinctions are redundant? If we look closely, there's a lowest common denominator here that, apparently, is beyond reproach. In being so preoccupied with other countries' concerns, however, we fail to register the precarity of our *own* circumstances. There is a fundamental divide between those who pretend that our system is a meritocracy

versus those who disagree means we lack a societal consensus on basic human rights. The societal effects of this are, of course, catastrophic: we are kept poor, bitter, and intellectually stunted; unsurprisingly, we are facing a pandemic of loneliness, depression, and anxiety.

A system based on schoolyard beliefs like *Might Makes Right* and *Finder's Keepers* is all fun and games if you arrive early enough to get in on the looting, but its supposed fuel: work ethic, private property, and hyper-individualism, it turns out, were much more effective when there were enslaved people and indentured servants working away in the background to keep things chugging along. What is also glossed over is the fact that such a system will necessarily tend towards concentration of wealth rather than dispersion, meaning that, as time passes, wealth inequality will only increase - and odds of upward mobility won't. These trends don't just apply to Africa, but to us, too.

Solutions for these dilemmas are not provided (beyond being told to work and pray harder), not that we even bother to ask for them; every shred of time and inclination we might have used to think critically is being sapped from us. Any frustration and despondence we have are thus directed inwards, and in turn projected out: we attack ourselves and each other, like lab rats deprived of food, sleep, and space.

But this is where it gets interesting: our troubles, according to those above and around us, at least, are purely coincidental, and they certainly aren't indicative of any systemic failings; any problems we have are rooted in our own shortcomings. The conclusion we've been led to is that, since luck has nothing to do with it, anyone with more money must be proportionally more industrious, wise, and flat out more deserving than us. Contrary to what you may have heard, the means of production are not being hoarded: Do each of us not possess self-interest, after all? And are we not each given the same number of hours per day? That's right - now back to work. It's up to the individual, and the individual alone, as the architect of their own life, to live up to their poten-

tial. By explicitly mapping out the route to prosperity and happiness, the system thus ensures that it will remain exalted: how can it be at fault if it has given me everything I need to succeed?

It's these beliefs that allow us to not particularly care that other Americans are in dire straits; from our point of view, they should be grateful for having an opportunity to build character. We see our indifference not as inhumanity but rather as a favor: *Let 'im cry himself to sleep... it'll toughen 'im up.* Alas, we so fetishize recovering from adversity that we barely stop to consider whether there might be a benefit to tackling its root causes; this would necessitate restructuring the very fabric of our society. Because the only moral compass we're told to worry about is the cost benefit analysis, anything that doesn't produce unitary value is an unjustifiable waste of resources. Outlay of time and capital is only permissible if positive return on investment is guaranteed. Every relationship thus becomes transactional, every interaction a zero-sum negotiation. Our esteem for things like human connection, civic pride and community engagement has been crippled.

Unsurprisingly, we cling to what security (however illusory or ephemeral) we can; we are taught to satisfy our insecurities and human need for belonging and community via the perpetual consumption of material goods and status symbols. Not incidentally, these purchases now include the litany of devices we tether ourselves to and that sit in our homes (and, increasingly, in our garages and driveways) and which hang onto our every word so that they can attune to our every possible need - a vicious cycle of surveillance and encroachment of personal privacy.



The point here is that Westerners don't have nearly as much liberty - *hauntological* liberty, as it were - as we're led to believe. The America-brand freedoms we enjoy (and the values of which we smugly extol) are only parts of a curated, "Disneyfied" experience. The "free" market's categorical imperative to only output

that which guarantees profit means that enjoying the luxuries of the modern world (including its media) requires being haunted by - and trapped in a past which cannot be banished or outrun. And it's a two-pronged attack: being forced to engage with wave after increasingly diluted and derivative wave not only precludes us from escaping from our past, it also compromises our future.

We, like the foreigners we're taught to pity, are distracted by spurious narratives of opportunity, forced to hold out hope for promises which will never be realized. Having delivered us to a point where our problems are now trivial (or altogether imaginary), history has thus been subsumed by a commercialized, never-ending, and intellectually-stunted reality - one in which everything changes, but nothing actually happens. Our gig (not any given occupation, that is, but our status quo) is slightly too cozy to leave, but nowhere near fulfilling or engaging enough to wholeheartedly devote oneself to. Just good enough, by a preponderance (which has, I assure you, been calculated), to make the prospect of obedience a more appealing one than going off-piste. We so love novelty and the illusion of choice that we accept cosmetic upgrades in lieu of meaningful change.

But it's not all relaxation; we have a vital role to play. As it turns out, it's not just our devices that make up the panopticon of economic and social control - it's us, too; we're its immune system, suppressing revolt at the individual level long before it's allowed to gain momentum and trouble those in power. We voluntarily debase ourselves, sacrificing our time and energy to ardently defend the rich and the status quo, even when these arguments are manifestly against our own interests. We sabotage each other, competing, criticizing, scolding, and snitching in defense of people and corporations who don't know we exist.

Unfortunately, by letting ourselves get bogged down in petty in-fighting over cosmetic and ultimately trivial issues at the fringes of this system, we have allowed its core presuppositions - the far more pernicious ones - to be taken for granted: namely, that growth and production must (and *ought*, morally-speaking)

continue in perpetuity. We see these claims as not as the unsubstantiated theories they are, but as immutable laws of nature. But we must realize the system we have now *isn't* “the natural state of things.” And this, frankly, is an understatement: the system isn't just contrived; it is, by definition, completely incapable of coexistence with our finite natural world. Contrary to what we're told, there is no such thing as “green” or “sustainable” infinite growth; these corporate catchphrases and euphemisms are oxymoronic. Unceasing expansion requires unceasing production, which requires unceasing extraction of labor and resources - and therefore never-ending destruction and waste creation.

In T.I.A., I argue that we, the comfortable, must not be afraid of acknowledging these issues and asking these difficult questions. Most importantly, though, we must not be afraid of each other. Our hyper-individualistic culture is intentionally designed to keep us in competition with one another and to make us forget that, in fact, we are far more alike than different. It is designed to keep us lonely, unsatisfied, distrustful, and exhausted, none of which are conducive to meaningful collective action. Of course, as individuals, this isn't our fault. That said, what we *can* control is whether we accept and admit that the foundations of our Western way of life might not be as infallible as we've been led to believe. If nothing else, it's our responsibility to educate ourselves properly before we decide to travel around the world.

ACT ONE
FIRST CONTACT

1

THE SEEDS OF DISCONTENT

OR: FOMO FATIGUE

I think it's time I confessed: I only went to Africa in the first place because of Hans Zimmer. That's right, the composer. It sounds outlandish, I know, but it's true - hand to god. I had a score of my own, you see, and it needed settling: the little coward had sucker punched me, unprovoked, several years earlier, and I'd been thirsting for revenge ever since. And get this: he chose Christmas to stage his attack. The nativity, for Pete's sake!

Alright, fine. I wasn't technically "assaulted." It was really only my sensibilities that sustained any damage. But, still...

The year was 2010. With my family watching on, I'd torn away the wrapping paper to reveal my first iPod. A miracle: until now, my parents (or Santa, rather) had staunchly resisted the early 2000s tide of gadget culture. Even here, I should add, the gift was only bequeathed on a technicality: my Dad had won it in a raffle at his office holiday party and had offered it to my mom first, but luckily she'd had no interest. It's clear now just how prescient their skepticism was, but at the time it had been infuriating. For years, I'd watched my friends get the newest phones, music players, and video game consoles, while the most advanced technology I'd been allowed was a knockoff Gameboy from the 99-cent bin of the local Chinese grocery; the toy had basic versions of Tetris and

Snake, and only lasted a few days before shorting out, to my great dismay. Dad had a Nintendo 64 he'd bought back when I was a baby, but my mom had made him retire it as soon as I was bipedal. By the time my sister and I rediscovered it in our basement, it was over a decade old and completely obsolete. Still, we weren't allowed to play, as the only game we had was James Bond's GoldenEye, which mom deemed too violent. The system had been discontinued for so long that other games were nearly impossible to find. Nevertheless, Dad and I smuggled it upstairs every time we knew she'd be out of the house for more than an hour or so.

But those interminable years of envy and pent-up frustration had been forgotten. I gleefully downloaded all the apps my friends had shown me: one of which, for instance, conjured a virtual lighter to the screen which ignited if you gave it a little shake; we would watch on, mesmerized (for this was, in our defense, a simpler time).

I then noticed that *Inception*, a box office hit that summer, had released its own official app that could, it claimed mysteriously, "augment my reality." I couldn't say no to that. I quickly discovered, to my mild disappointment, that this software offered nothing like the technology used in the film, which had allowed the characters to design and explore complex dream-worlds. Instead, it enhanced the user's world by providing background music, playing different songs based on whatever you were doing at the time; there were about a dozen tracks to unlock in total. Given that Herr Zimmer had written a brilliant score for the movie, I convinced myself this little gauntlet he'd contrived would be a worthy cause. Trusting his guidance, and desperate to push my new device to its limits, I got to work.

The first song required that you hold the device in direct sunlight - thankfully, it was a clear day. For the next, you had to be using a stairway, so I ran back inside and scampered up and down the basement stairs until the app registered my changes in elevation. The rewards weren't particularly noteworthy; mostly just

loops of mysterious, ethereal ambience in various tempos, but it was a satisfying treasure hunt all the same; I spent the rest of my afternoon scurrying around at mein new führer's behest. Eventually, I got to the last item on the agenda. When I tapped the screen to load my instructions, the dopamine hit I'd come to expect didn't arrive. A notification window in the shape of a padlock popped up: "To unlock this track, open this application while in Africa." I was dumbstruck. What was this? Some kind of sick joke?

At dinner that evening, I forced down some stuffing and a Brussels sprout, but the gut punch I'd received earlier that afternoon had well and truly spoiled my appetite.

"Nobody in our family's ever gone to Africa. I don't even *know* anyone who's been!" I said to my parents. Here I was, stuck in the middle of rural Pennsylvania, with no trip to Africa in sight. I couldn't possibly know that I was to spend, in total, two full years there before I turned 25. And why would there be? People from Amish country didn't just go to *Africa* - they went to the state farm show to see the 1,000-pound butter sculptures. And these, by the way, were never even particularly memorable, usually depicting some mundane, bucolic scene; a pigtailed little Amish girl petting a life-sized dairy cow, for example. I balked at the injustice of it all. There was no rhyme or reason: yeah, a scene of the movie had taken place in Africa - but they shot a few scenes in Japan, too. Shouldn't I also have to go *there*?

I mulled things over deep into the night. After hours of tossing and turning, I finally identified the real architect of our distress: Zimmer. This was all part of his plan. After inevitably failing his impossible task, we'd blame Africa and its peoples and, in our blind rage, forget who had sanctioned the operation in the first place.

For now, I retreated to the technological bread and circuses, deleting his app and re-downloading the lighter as well as a virtual pint of beer that poured out as you tilted the phone. After a few months of convalescence, I was able to put the ordeal out of my

mind, but not before the seed had been planted: I'd need to prove my parasocial nemesis wrong... I had to simmer the Zimmer.

Thankfully, as gadgets of the day could only hold a few songs and apps, I'd needed to clear space if I wanted to try other games not designed to incite racial hatred. But I remained wary; shortcomings of that era's technology notwithstanding, I knew full well that I'd received forewarning of its eventual omnipotence. Rudimentary as it may have been, Zimmer's app, available at no cost, had effortlessly gained my trust and dependence. How quickly (and with an almost sentient duplicity!) it had commandeered me as a vessel to further its own interests.

I spent those next few teenage years foundering, attempting (in vain) to keep up with an increasingly online world. My glorious stint at the bleeding edge of technology - and therefore society - was short-lived. My precious iPod, it turned out, was quickly rendered obsolete. Within a matter of months, it and its competitors had been upstaged by the next generation; bigger screen, faster processor, and more memory - and a higher price point, of course. I could stomach this once or twice, but soon I found myself cut adrift from the pack. The pay-as-you-go flip phone I got the next summer put up even less of a fight. At that point, the mere fact that my phone and music player were two separate devices was enough to torpedo my reputation. I wasn't made fun of; somehow, that would have been better. The other kids didn't even bother with that; I was the subject of pity more than anything else.

Every few months, there was a fleet of new gadgets and video game consoles. By some turn of fate, my dad got a deal on a couple of computers. The office complex next to his was clearing out its storage space, and he happened to be walking by. They'd given him a few desktops as well as a laptop or two. Finally, I thought, this was it. My chance to reclaim my role in society, and perhaps even to attract some admiration. They may have had nicer phones than me, but almost none of my peers had their own computers. I was about to shoot up the rankings, and hinted as

much when I got home and posted on Facebook. It was, necessarily, a cryptic message (as I had no idea the specifics of my dad's haul), but it conveyed the crux: that I was about to have access to more processing power than all of them combined.

In the end, this turned out to be true, but in the least useful way possible. The haul *was* huge; something like seven or eight computers. Each of them, though, was nearly a decade old; half of them were those turquoise plastic Apple desktops that looked like the nose of a Boeing... and this was before they would have been considered "retro" or cool, by the way. All told, they weighed nearly 200 pounds. I deleted my cryptic Facebook post.

Variations of this happened often. Whenever I came close, I was beaten back. The cycle felt never-ending; completely, utterly unable to keep pace with the world - the world around me, at least. Trying to keep up was more disheartening than never joining the race in the first place; the effects of this cycle - bitterness, envy, disappointment, social alienation - certainly felt more acute. The kids who didn't have *anything* were weird, sure, but they weren't really measured by the same standards. They were just new-age, home schooled, or hippies (or their parents were, at least). In no-man's-land, however, there was no plausible deniability: you wanted, manifestly, to be in the club, and everyone else knew it. We were all trained to feel perpetually afraid of missing out, I think, but nobody ever talked about it. Not to me, at least.

This ongoing struggle was juxtaposed against the lobotomizing backdrop of central Pennsylvanian Amish country. The landscapes were expansive and pastoral: rolling fields of soy, tobacco, corn, manure. The region is dominated by the Appalachian ridge, whose ripples of wooded foothills are reserved as State Parks and hunting lands. The people are proudly "blue collar" and "hard-nosed." Small-town values like faith, self-flagellating work ethic, and prolific child-rearing are instilled from birth, prioritized above - or often to the exclusion of - all else. For many, these confines provide stability and offer a comforting presence, perhaps in the same way a stockyard's squeeze chute calms

down panicked cattle. Unfortunately for me, no such sedating effect kicked in, and my years in farm country left me disaffected and desperate to distance myself.

Departure in any form, however, was explicitly discouraged. Despite the trappings of the modern world having alleviated many of the concerns and scarcities of decades past, the Puritanical scaffolding remains (it's called the Quaker state, after all). Agriculture still abounds, but almost all other industry - lumber, coal mining, and steel production - has dried up, leaving many of the state's once-thriving towns impoverished and dilapidated. The resulting disillusionment has seeped into the collective consciousness, exacerbating the scar tissue of the depression. Comorbidities of this include a suppression of curiosity and a vague distrust of the outside world. Nevertheless, it was obvious this unyielding pragmatism was now rooted in fear more than poverty: the universities to which we were being shunted now cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Something wasn't adding up.

Perhaps unintentionally revealing how feeble they knew their case to be, the argument commonly used to dissuade young people from deviating from the education-to-rat-race pipeline in the US is that "if you leave, you might not have the motivation to come back." Willful myopia being a requirement for success struck me as further cause to be skeptical. By the time I'd finished a year of university, I understood that exploring a far-flung corner of the world was an act of subversion. (This admittedly sounds melodramatic, but the statistics confirmed it to be more than just angsty whining; for reference, only about a quarter of the population in my home state even had a passport, a proportion which, I cannot overstate, *felt* even lower). So, at the first opportunity, I withdrew from school to plan my expedition.



Alas, my parents said they'd only help me fund the trip if I was doing something "useful." But, with only a high school degree under my belt, the only paid work I'd be eligible to do abroad was manual labor. I didn't love the sound of spending a year picking apples or working in a textile mill, so voluntourism it was: part saving the world, (bigger) part sightseeing. I trawled through dozens of websites which advertised various roles depending on the needs of a given region or school: childcare in Vietnam, animal rehabilitation in Tanzania, or computer education in Guatemala. Until my research began, I'd presumed volunteering work would cost nothing but my time. However, it soon became clear that outlay would be unavoidable; each of these programs required you to organize your own travel and cover your day-to-day expenses; you'd also be paying your chosen organizations for a basic lunch and dinner as well as your bed in something like a youth hostel.

Moreover, I began to notice a peculiar hierarchy in these directories of (supposed) benevolence: the roles demanding the most money didn't seem to be the ones providing the most help. These organizations were all based in countries where the cost of living was under five dollars a day, and the main variables were mostly controlled, with basic food and basic housing provided. In South Africa, for example, our weekly ration was a loaf of bread and a box of dried pasta, bran cereal, and long-life milk. On occasion, there was also a small bag of apples or oranges. Assuming these provisions were roughly universal, it was therefore confusing to see that rescuing baby sea turtles in Bali or Costa Rica cost many thousands of dollars a week, while that same fee would be enough for you to cover working in a childcare center on the outskirts of, say, Bangkok for six months. I'm sure accounting justification for this could be produced, but I suspected it was no coincidence. These companies knew baby turtles present a unique opportunity for growing one's online following. Helping some Thai orphans, while still scoring you a couple of points, doesn't offer quite the same glamor factor. Philanthropy, it seemed, had

become commercialized, with middlemen NGOs (non-governmental organizations, in this case charities and other foreign aid groups) leveraging more desirable destinations and roles against those determined to be less so, inflating the prices young travelers paid by adding vaguely defined fees of hundreds or even thousands of dollars.

The company I ended up choosing had been mentioned to me by a cousin who'd gone abroad a few years earlier. It seemed legitimate enough, with a headquarters in New Zealand which oversaw dozens of independent, smaller organizations scattered throughout several impoverished countries. I filtered the vacancies by "sport," as it was the only field in which I had any teaching experience. The only jobs available were in a seaside suburb of Cape Town called Muizenberg, which was known for its quaint rows of brightly-colored little beach huts. I could pick between being a gym teacher at a local school or a surf instructor down at the beach. As appealing as the latter sounded, I struck it from contention; I'd never surfed before and didn't back myself to learn on the job. As I've been informed on the tennis court hundreds of times, I'm terribly wooden and upright. I walk and run like I've had a double knee replacement. Furthermore, I have a limited relationship (at best) with my center of gravity: I didn't learn how to use a playground swing until I was well into my twenties (... you'll keep that to yourself, I hope.)

I didn't know too much about South Africa itself. We had a family friend who'd visited the 2010 World Cup and had raved about his experience. And I liked their music - or at least my idea of it: my parents had always had Paul Simon's Graceland album playing on our home stereo. More abstractly, I was undeniably drawn to the notion that this would, irrefutably, be a *bona fide* adventure: it was almost 10,000 miles away from home, in the southern hemisphere, and, perhaps most importantly, it presented a chance to finally prove to Mr. Zimmer that I wasn't a xenophobe. So, with my arbitrary criteria having been met, my Rumspringa could commence.

Still, I remained wary. This genre of nonconformity had been done before - exhaustively - and this concerned me greatly. Reference to “gap year” travel carries with it a certain level of cliché: trust-fund kids with dreams of “seeing life from a new perspective” and “making a difference” during their month or so in Guatemala or Kenya. Or there’s the unshaven backpacker, for whom life’s just become a bit too chaotic, hoping to “break free” and get “back to basics.” I was desperate to avoid this seemingly requisite triteness. Of course, I’ve heard the other side of the argument: “If people want to visit a country for a week and a half and think they made a difference, let them! Who cares?”

Me, that’s who. I couldn’t see one more sorority vlogger talking about how she’d become entwined with the True Spirit of Africa after getting her picture taken while petting a (suspiciously drowsy-looking) lion. Such photos, I would come to learn, never capture the true magic of the moment, which invariably involves two liters of sedative and the poor animal’s handler, just out of frame, armed with a tranquilizer gun.

Cynical as their methods may be, however, these zookeepers are just obliging to market demands: in the years following that run-in with Zimmer, the psychological chinks he’d targeted were exploited by far more nefarious operatives. Smartphones becoming ubiquitous had dovetailed seamlessly with the aspirations of social media companies; in their marketplace, we willingly sacrificed our privacy for the validation of others. This trade-off becomes insatiable: the more you get, the more you crave; dissatisfaction becomes our resting state.

Now, it seemed, these companies had succeeded in commodifying “*Wanderlust*” as a personality trait and branding aesthetic. People were obliged to prove they were a world traveler by posting photos, blogs, and videos, creating an incessant demand for content (which is where the sleepy lions come in handy). This need for documentation was especially urgent when it came to virtuous deeds. As the proverbial tree that falls in the forest, if

you'd fed some orphans the other day but forgot to film yourself ladling their porridge, did your act of charity even happen?

But resisting the urge to document my every movement was an ancillary concern. The overarching questions remained: what this type of trip ought to *be*, what it should *mean*. Sure, the best-case scenario would feature rediscovering my African roots, but this wasn't something I was banking on. I was, after all, an imposter, a self-interested fraud; I wasn't *really* someone who "goes to Africa to save the children." I wondered whether I could even take myself seriously now that I embodied such a trope.

How could I, in good faith, take up my Burden (if you will) given my crippling incredulity? For heaven's sake - I hadn't even left yet, and I was ready to defenestrate the next guy who talked about going to Costa Rica hoping to improve the lives of the locals only to realize, halfway through his 10-day visit, that the little urchins taught *him* more than he could ever have taught *them!* Surely, walking around with my eyes permanently rolled would compromise my ability to give full attention to my students.

In light of all of this, you've likely concluded that I was far from an ideal candidate to hit the "Gringo Trail." You'd be right. *I* knew it, too - even at the time. Even so, I just had to see what all the fuss was about.



Fuelled by the manic frugality of student travel, I monitored flights to South Africa from every airport on the eastern seaboard for several weeks, tracking and cross-referencing their price fluctuations across multiple websites. After almost a month of deliberation, I chose the cheapest option, saving me \$40. It gave me a feeling of profound satisfaction to know I'd outwitted the behemoth of the airline industry. Frankly, I couldn't believe an amateur like myself had been allowed to find - let alone *take advantage of* - such an oversight. I'd finally struck back. I'd never

been able to "capitalize on a market inefficiency" before. To this point, I'd only ever read about this in textbooks. Clearly, independent travel websites and flight checkers were something the bloated, antiquated airlines hadn't yet accounted for. But I couldn't stop to feel bad for the business I'd surely crippled, nor to wonder how many livelihoods I'd ruined. It wasn't usually like me to be so ruthless, but there was no time for sympathy: the wheels of the Free Market stop for no one.

Alas, my hubris had led me into a trap, adding cost, time, and discomfort. Departing from New York City, I learned, was impractical and inconvenient rather than swanky and cosmopolitan; between all the train tickets and other expenses involved with getting to the terminal, every cent I'd so cleverly saved in my earlier dealings was now gone, (along, to my chagrin, with about 150 more of my precious dollars).

On the plane, I sat next to a black South African man, and we soon struck up a conversation. He'd been visiting his daughter, he said. She now lived in the US and had paid for his trip; this was the first time he'd ever flown. I peppered him with questions about our destination - his home city - before the conversation shifted to politics. For over thirty years he had been loyal to Mandela's party, which has remained in power since the country gained independence. But, the man said, many who were hopeful the country would use the "Freedom Party's" momentous victory as a springboard were now jaded.

"The biggest problem today is corruption. It goes to the very top. They've very clever about it. They give big contracts to all of their friends, and they all keep getting richer."

"Have you ever thought about voting for a different party?"

"No, we can't. The ANC isn't perfect, but there's no other option. We don't trust the others."

He told me he had lived in Cape Town almost his whole life, but he'd never visited Muizenberg, which was only a half-hour drive away.

"I have seen the pictures, but it's a town mostly for surfers and

the English. But it would be great to go one day. I love the beach, but I don't know how to drive, and the taxis are too expensive."

Shortly after arriving, I learned a round trip fare from where he lived would cost about two dollars; I was glad I'd restrained myself from telling him about my plane ticket shenanigans.

2

RUSH WEEK

New volunteers were asked to arrive on either the first or third Friday of the month so that the management team could better coordinate our meals, groceries, and sleeping arrangements. I was the only one arriving from New York, but there were a few others in my intake group. We were collected at the airport and, after a short drive, we were dropped off outside the organization's headquarters, a converted bungalow which housed about a dozen volunteers and had a small office from which the admin team worked during the day.

As we unloaded our luggage from the van, I struggled to hide my nervous excitement. I'd made it all the way to the furthest tip of this massive, mysterious continent, ready to explore the land while forming lasting connections with other young people from exotic corners of the world. The outer gate buzzed open and we filed towards the house. This was it: my adventure into The Great Unknown was well and truly underway. No turning back now.

They welcomed us inside. I took stock of the group as we began to mingle. There were about thirty of us in total. Nearly everyone was white, from North America or Western Europe, and in their early twenties; roughly two-thirds were women. I had steeled myself for naught, apparently. I don't know what I'd been

expecting, but it mostly just felt like I'd crashed a homecoming party at my local university. My early interactions with the group did little to contravene this.

The first guy I talked to happened to be from a town next to mine in Pennsylvania. Just my luck; I had spent \$2,000 and flown 12,000 kilometers to re-enact a scene I'd been part of at every social gathering for as long as I could remember: here I sat in plastic patio furniture, drinking tasteless beer and lamenting the horse-and-buggies we so often got stuck behind while driving through Amish Country.

When I went inside to refill my drink, I passed by the living room and noticed a small, somber group of girls. They were still staring at the floor in silence on my way back through. Curious, I popped my head in.

"Everything okay in here?"

"Yeah, it's just that.... it's Sarah's last night," one said, without looking up. "We won't be able to go on without her. What are we going to do?"

"Oh, that sucks... Sorry, but who's Sarah?"

Sarah, I learned, had been their co-volunteer for the past three weeks. I was invited to her last supper at a curry house nearby, a tearful affair during which Sarah received gifts from her more devout followers and wondered aloud if life would be worth living upon her return home. Testimonials celebrating her bleeding heart were tearfully exchanged, one example being that she'd let another of the girls keep one of her jackets. I dug a little deeper later on. It turned out that she hadn't found one she liked in South Africa so had spared no expense, having her parents ship one of her sable fur coats overnight from New York.

I paid my respects, finding myself genuinely disappointed that my path had so narrowly missed such an inspiring figure's. We walked home, and I waited a few hours for my housemates to progress through their stages of grief before I broached the topic again.

"So, what made your relationship with Sarah special?"

“It’s impossible to describe. We were... Soul Sisters.”

I waited, desperately searching her face for any sign she had delivered this line with her tongue in cheek. No such luck.

My dealings with the Soul Sisterhood amid its disbandment would prove to be a microcosm of most of my subsequent interactions with the other volunteers. For my part, a search for even just one ally in the battle against a tide of ham-fisted poignancy. Futile, I know, but a hill on which I was happy to die.

The night wore on and people filed off to bed. It’d been a long day, so I downed what was left of my drink and prepared to follow their lead. Then, for a minute, it seemed as if we were going to get some real excitement after all. I heard murmurings between a few of the tenured volunteers, one of whom ventured into the house to check on a guy named Matt. I asked one of the Soul Sisters who Matt was. “Oh, his friend got stabbed a couple of nights ago - he’s alive, but he had to fly home. Matt’s totally fine, he’s just been sad the last couple of days.”

Matt soon came out to greet us, and one of the girls noticed he was wearing the stab victim’s hoodie.

“*Hell yeah*, I’m wearing it,” he said. “Check it out, it still has the knife hole!” He twisted to his left and stretched the bottom of the sweater out to show us a jagged opening in the kidney area.

The group then explained to us that the main volunteer house had been broken into earlier in the week by a group of masked men who’d learned that the occupants were young, naïve travelers. Matt’s friend had unwittingly stumbled out of his room to use the toilet and come face to face with two ski-masked men holding laptops. Still groggy, the friend had blocked their way and tried to question the men, at which point one of them had lashed out and caught him with the knife. The intruders ran, escaping out the back door and over the fence. This alarming story was recounted with a puzzling nonchalance.

“There are different rules here,” they said. “That’s just what happens. It was our fault for forgetting to turn on the alarm before we went to bed. One girl flew home last week after getting

her laptop and passport stolen from her at gunpoint. But come on, she walked to the internet café along the same route every day. What did she think was going to happen? You have to be smarter than that.”

Despite their arrivals only preceding ours by a couple of weeks, these volunteers already seemed jaded. To us newcomers, she didn't sound particularly stupid; in fact, she sounded like the helpless victim of a terrifying gunpoint robbery. We looked at each other in disbelief, in part because none of these revelations had been mentioned by the administration team during our orientation.



Work was to start on Monday, but I had no clue what to expect. I'd worked as a tennis instructor back in the US, but I had a feeling I wouldn't get to coach my preferred sport: Google Earth reconnaissance of the school's surrounds had shown little more than a dirt patch roughly the size of a football pitch. We had a driver who would taxi us between our houses and the five or six nearby schools where we were divvied up. As I climbed into the minibus on the morning of my first day, I told him the name of the school I'd been assigned to.

“No, no,” he said, “Impossible. We pulled all the volunteers out of that school. Nobody's there anymore.”

I double-checked my printed schedule and, sure enough, that *was* where I was supposed to be. As I watched groups of two, three, and four volunteers get dropped off in front of their schools, my apprehension grew. Everyone else, however, was in a cheery mood, singing along to a VHS tape of 2000s American R&B music videos. The driver played this hour-long cassette on the van's small television for the duration of my trip; I still have David Guetta's *When Love Takes Over* seared into my brain. I recognized one of the songs, Usher, I think, or Mario, and I tried to join in - fake it 'til you make it - but it wasn't long before I had

to switch to the women's parts. All I could muster was a tremulous falsetto, you see, and I was in too deep to quit. My panic became increasingly audible even in my speaking voice as I interrogated those who remained in search of a potential co-worker, but my pleas proved fruitless. I found myself dumped from the taxi van at its last stop, lone sacrifice to two hundred waiting juveniles.

I was greeted by the head of the school sports department. Pastor Busby - but I could just call him 'Pastor' - was a rotund, goateed, colored man who wore a different parachute-nylon track-suit each day of the week, with matching baseball cap - today's, if you're wondering, was dark purple. Anyway, he seemed harmless enough and relatively competent, and my anxiety gradually subsided as he gave me a tour of the school facilities and a briefing on what his usual lesson plans were for each group. We ended the tour outside his office.

"So," I asked, "when's our first class?"

"Let me check." He skimmed over the laminated copy of the timetable I'd been given. "Ah. Here it is: you'll be taking the year eights out after lunch."

"I will?"

"Oh! I should have mentioned - I won't be around the rest of the week... I have a few appointments. Anyway, here are the keys to the equipment shed. And remember - don't be afraid to tell their teachers if any of the students misbehave."

In the entirety of my time there, I saw him, on average, once every two weeks. There were days when I would go through my daily routine before discovering him in his office around lunchtime, reading the newspaper or watching a movie on his computer.

"Oh! Hi, Jack. Hope everything's going well out there. And remember; don't be afraid to report those students if you need to. They can be lazy!"

"Sure thing, Pastor."

Admittedly, it seemed he'd been running quite a regimented operation. To quiet any chattering before the session would start,

he had trained the students to respond to his “Good morning, class!” with a marine-corps-esque, “Good morning, Pastor Busby, God bless you today!” - he was, after all, the self-anointed head of the school’s religion department. This was followed by total silence while they stood at attention. Although I quickly got rid of the second half of their mantra, I liked eliciting a “Good morning, Jack!” every once in a while.

Unfortunately, this exchange only bought me a few minutes. Almost immediately, I realized that, without a whistle to aid in the wrangling process, I’d be rendered totally impotent. As if trying to herd several dozen excitable nine-year-olds from the townships of Cape Town who hadn’t had a gym class in weeks wasn’t challenging enough in its own right, my being a blond American made commanding authority nearly impossible: the children were far too preoccupied with trying to touch my hair, which fascinated them. Alas, the children weren’t my only adversary. Nor, in fact, were they even *close* to the most formidable. This title was held by the elements, for which I had also arrived woefully unprepared. Indeed, it was within this barbed wire-lined quadrangle where I would discover the true extent of my frailty, how pitiful my threshold was for discomfort.

3

NATURE

Foolishly, I'd only checked the average temperature, which looked like it would be agreeable. But the thermometer didn't tell the whole story; for most of the year, unremitting gale-force winds batter the Cape, as if to stress to this delicate spindle of land that it's allowed to exist solely by the mercy of forces of unfathomable scale. Notwithstanding, I struggled to muster up much reverential awe of my own - reverential *dread*, maybe. Awestruck as I'd liked to have been, it was impossible to focus on much beyond the rolling dust clouds these winds whipped up.

Apparently, whistles were in short supply in the greater Cape Town area; it took about two weeks to secure one. Even then, it was another week and a half before I regained my voice. My being left hoarse for the first few weeks from bellowing into them was the least of it. These sandstorms enveloped me, their swirling granules burrowing, weeviling into my every orifice, scouring my every nook and cranny. My contact lenses, for their part, put up pathetically little resistance. They instantly found themselves desiccated, with any flexibility and transparency lost, thus making it appear to onlookers as though I'd been stricken by matte-gray cataracts in both eyes. These, of course, blurred my vision and left my eyes weeping and bloodshot.

My poor old nasal filtration system, meanwhile, was so overwhelmed that a sort of respiratory menstruation was triggered: grisly nosebleeds plagued me several times a day as my sinus cavity shed its lining. Regrettably, there were no tampons sized to fit my nostrils. Even if there had been, I couldn't risk getting caught raiding the dispenser in the girls' bathroom. ("It's not what it looks like!" "What does it look like?") I had to make do with wads of toilet paper (from the boys' bathroom) which dangled down, tickling my upper lip as I stomped around. The single-ply tissue, so cheap it was almost transparent, didn't absorb a drop of my blood, which ran down behind the little paper stalactites before drying in the wind, scabbing over to form a small, crusty, tooth-brush mustache. I must have made for a pathetic sight by the end of the day: blind, feeble and wheezing, any distinguishing features having been sand-blasted from my face. I felt like the English Patient, or one of those Peruvian mummies they find in shallow graves far up in the Andes, where the altitude and cold, moistureless air keeps the cadavers well preserved but stiff and leathery. Though I'm sure my students would have been sympathetic to my plight, I resolved to suffer in silence. Putting on a brave face, I discovered, was a bridge too far: in my condition, the best I could manage was a pained grimace which, I learned when I checked in the mirror that evening, had me looking more constipated than stoic.



Thankfully, we only worked a few hours a day, which gave me time to recover between deployments. However fraught my relationship with nature at work, I was entirely capable of shelving our disagreements in my free time. In pairs or small groups we'd climb neighboring Muizenberg Mountain or call a taxi to take us further afield to the foot of any of the dozens of trailheads around the peninsula. The city, through no fault of its own, I suppose, appeared an inconvenience to the peninsula, a landscape so

impossibly beautiful that any sign of us - our trappings of steel, cement, our industrial paraphernalia, no matter how well-designed - would have been an eyesore or, at best, an accessory.

That the city was fated to be overshadowed was true not only in an aesthetic sense but in a quite literal one: like water filling a puddle, taking whatever shape it's allowed to by the solid structures, settling into the lowest possible point, so did the human sprawl, taking what land its host, the Cape, bequeathed. As a result, the city proper is contained in a carved out bowl on the peninsula's north side and loomed over from 1,000 meters by Table Mountain, a constant presence whose sweeping plateau appears, at least from the streets down below, implausibly level. Almost year round, the mountain employs its party trick: even on otherwise clear days, a thick layer of white fog sits firmly atop the plateau, covering it snugly and not going an inch further. This blanket - the "tablecloth" - happily lets the winds tug at its fringes, refusing to be dragged more than a few meters beyond its comfort zone atop the elevated plain. Occasionally, a particularly strong wind will gain purchase and yank a few wispy threads down towards the city or even, with a little imagination, conjuring the powdery head of a rolling avalanche which spills partway down the slope but never seems to gain ground. Even then, any volume lost on the slopes below is instantly replaced, the almost comically protective security detail refusing to leave any inch of the plateau unprotected.

Devil's Peak and Lion's Head, two semi-attached mountains, bookend the larger one with their own distinct (if slightly lower) peaks, protruding northwards to create the natural geologic amphitheater of the City Bowl. Viewed from the north (anywhere on the western coast within a few miles of the city), this trio gives the city an iconic skyline (and its official logo): two deputies standing guard, one facing northwest out to sea and the other overlooking the mainland to the northeast. For those lucky enough to spend enough time in their presence (an inevitability for those living on or near the peninsula) this entourage offers

effortless navigational assistance. With any daylight, the mountains' myriad of distinct silhouettes provide instant reference points for those who have lost their bearings. I learned of one such example when my students alerted me to the local elephant, our school's mascot: from where we stood, the nearest portion of the gray ridgeline curved gently before slanting downward, carving out the animal's recognizable sloped forehead against the western sky. Where the forehead overlapped the next slope, which ascended southwards just behind, the resulting shadow carried downwards to traced a low-hanging trunk, while a large cave set into the mountain gave the profile a perfectly proportioned left eye.

The outer edge of the peninsula has compelling vistas of its own, most notably a view out over the Atlantic. Getting there, however, is easier said than done. The long way around Lion's head sends you past the V&A Waterfront, a heavily trafficked shopping center with galleries and restaurants. Your alternative is to try Kloof Nek, a narrow pass over the thin, raised bridge of land that keeps the lion unmistakably leashed to the table. This route is often closed due to forest fires on neighboring slopes or bottlenecked by car accidents induced by the unforgiving and chaotic road. At dusk, thin lines of fluorescent red and white crawl slowly over this pass to and from the city's palm tree-lined, sunset-facing beach, Camp's Bay, which milks every second of natural light before illuminating itself like the rest of the city. The longest, but certainly most beautiful, route is the Chapman's Peak drive, which cuts through the mountainous coastline between Cape Town and Noordhoek to the south. The road has been cut into the mountainside, with sheer slopes above and below. A good setting for a car chase, a bad setting to take your eyes off the road. South Africa drives on the left, so going northwards is recommended (and sitting on the driver's side) gives the best view out over the Atlantic and Hout Bay.

However you manage to arrive to the northwestern, beach-lined segment of the coast, it becomes clear how Lion's Head got

its name: its base, a wide, grassy hill, slopes gradually upwards before producing an incongruous peak of exposed rock which, in profile, resembles a lion in sphinx-like repose gazing out to sea. At sunset, the tapered shadow of Lion's Head is projected down into the city bowl below, like the cartoonish shadow of a villain towering behind an oblivious child. The houses in this unlucky triangle are benighted long before the rest of the city - which must be aggravating in a country with electricity so scarce.

Behind the Lion, you notice that the edge of the Table presiding over this western side of the cape is much less uniform - though no less imperious - than the crescent which renders the City bowl on the north. Here, on the west side, before the open ocean, massive ravines cut down through the rock face, dividing the face of the mountain into numerous distinct, jagged peaks. Their magnificent, serrated silhouette, known (confusingly) as the Twelve Apostles, overlooks immaculate beaches as well as the wealthy neighborhoods that have colonized the narrow tract of land between the mountains and sea. With workable land here so scarce, architects often get creative, building around or over boulders and gullies. Further south, the Apostles give way to a stretch of less precipitous peaks (among them, of course, our school's pensive elephant), which continue down the entire cape, culminating at the Cape of Good Hope, Africa's southwestern-most point.

From a satellite view, the Cape, which juts briefly westward before forging south for a few miles towards Antarctica, seems extraneous to the mainland, almost alien. This gnarled, spindly appendix, attached to the bottom-left of such an immense land-mass seems more likely the result of a mythical party game on a tectonic scale: "Pin the Tail on the Continent," perhaps; alternatively, as in the fables where the earth grows on the back of a giant tortoise, it could be a sprout off Africa's vastness, a volunteer sapling from an accidentally dropped seed. In any case, we're left with this little seahorse tail, with its own biosphere and climate, curling off into the ocean. Regardless of whether it started as a

cosmic pollination or geological transplant, the Cape has well earned its squatter's rights: Table Mountain, as every local tour guide worth their salt will remind you, is older than Mount Everest. Indeed, South Africa's intrinsic beauty comes from how effortlessly it evokes the pre-Holocene; few places above water so clearly exhibit evidence of massive tectonic struggle.

Sure enough, the Table and the regions other mountains inland are remnants of a far more substantial landmass: Gondwana, the supercontinent comprising what is now Africa, the Middle East, as well as most of the other subequatorial landmasses. In short: a few hundred million years ago, India (picking up Madagascar along the way), had smashed into Africa, which itself was already headed for impact with Argentina, Brazil, and Antarctica. When these plates converged, there was massive geologic uplift. Their union eventually ran its course: India split off to antagonize Eurasia and start its own spin off project (the still-growing Himalayas), while the other plates making up Gondwana were wrenched apart by asthenospheric forces beneath the earth's crust. But they had done admirable work, setting the stage for the Cambrian explosion, a brief (well, 20,000,000 year) window during which multi-cellular, complex life forms proliferated. Like ex-bandmates or lovers who still have their matching tattoos, proof of their shared history is offered by the fossil evidence of identical flora and fauna discovered, for which these now distant continents split custody. Millions of years of erosion followed as the continents drifted towards the positions where they're found today. With their tectonic momentum now in reverse, no longer underwriting the rocks' ascent, their uppermost layers (however element-resistant) were left in the lurch.

The fold mountains which, today, run along South Africa's south and western coasts were, at one time, the lower, buried layers of far greater mountain ranges which dominated the landscape. The bulk of their rock, still accordioned and distorted from the orogenic events that had helped form Gondwana, was whittled away; once the top layer had been dealt with, erosion made

short work of the weaker sediments, hollowing out the Cape Flats to an uninspiring, sandy wasteland sitting just a few meters above sea-level.

Today, mountains along those respective plates' fault lines are just remnants of the *troughs* - if you can believe it - of those far larger ranges: imagine if the Grand Canyon was worn away and all that remained were a few boulders from its stream bed - the proportions aren't exactly the same, but you get the idea. For now, Table Mountain clings on, a barnacle small enough to have been overlooked thus far.

On a clear day, the view out over the Atlantic offers further confirmation of nature's pre-eminence (doing so, I might add, in a far more agreeable manner than the wind). Several miles out to sea, massive cargo ships chug along the shipping routes skirting the continent. The wide, languid wakes they follow remain long after the vessels have passed, making it impossible to ascertain whether these are merely aquatic contrails or a product of the currents themselves. Regardless, these placid (but unmistakable) thoroughfares offer an enticing illusion: to perceive the supposedly imperceptible.

Waters from the frigid South Atlantic travel up from Antarctica to combine with cold swells rising from the depths nearer to Africa, hugging its western coast and reaching as far as the equator. Depending on the season, whales drift along this aquatic pipeline and, closer to shore, pods of dolphins churn the surrounding waters as they feed on the schools of fish drawn to the nutrient-rich channel. These sharks and whales are also visible from height along the Cape's eastern side, looking out across False Bay. Closer to these oblong shadows, you might ascertain what it is that's lurking: a towering spray or the top few inches of a dark, oily knoll being kept above the surface tell you it's likely a Southern Right Whale (this "Who's on first?"-esque name comes from being identified by 18th century harpooners as the "right" whales to hunt). Rarely, you'll get a terrifying glimpse of a Great White's dorsal fin, though luckily the owners of these are less

inclined to approach the shore than their favored prey, the Cape seals, who are regularly seen fishing and surfing the waves just offshore. Humans, too, are drawn offshore: the wind accompanying the aforementioned current (the Benguela) happens to create ideal conditions - not just for nosebleeds, but also for water sports (including, as we'll soon learn, kite surfing).

4

BONE APPETIT

Despite its impossibly majestic and awe-inspiring natural surroundings, my school still found itself in a rough, underfunded catchment area. For most students, their school-issued uniforms were the nicest clothes they owned, and they would wear them for weeks on end: a starched white button-down T-shirt, with charcoal-gray wool shorts or long trousers for the boys and pleated skirts of the same material for girls. Their shoes were simple, black, Velcro-strapped trainers, their gym clothes were simple white cotton shirts and shorts. To warm up, they wore over these outfits nylon tracksuits in maroon with gold trim, the school's colors (for my leaving gift, the principal would give me a striped varsity tie, which I cherish).

For students coming in from the nearby townships, this school was the safest place they could be. The HIV/AIDS rate was over 35% in certain districts, and these settlements were often self-governed and violently controlled by gangs, with almost no police presence. Though the school's neighborhood was comparatively more developed, security remained a concern: there were tall, barbed-wire-topped fences around the property, and the teachers instructed me not to leave the premises at any point in the day - even collecting a ball that had been accidentally kicked

out onto the street was forbidden. I took these instructions as suggestions rather than orders, reserving the right to quickly fetch a football if needed.

Whatever rebellious urges I had were quashed during the week my school closed for its mid-term holidays, during which we offered a day-camp for the students. I'd planned a light itinerary, hoping to mostly leave the kids to it and do some relaxing of my own. But, with the school's premises closed, the only spot nearby with sufficient space to entertain several dozen children was an empty lot inside the nearby township. We'd be allowed access, with the caveat that we'd need a security detail with us for protection: we would technically be on someone's "turf," meaning us volunteers would be at serious risk if we didn't have a local there to vouch for us; our students, we were told, would be fine. Not to worry: the administrators kept a local man on retainer for just such an occasion: Charles, who was a friendly fellow who loved helping with the kids and also keeping the volunteers abreast of the township's goings-on. On the first day of camp he informed us that, just last week, men from his neighborhood had "dealt with" two young men who'd tried to burgle a family in the township (this was commonly a part of a gang initiation). He implied the robbers had been beaten either to death or brought very close to it, which seemed to be the standard penalty for those determined by neighborhood leaders to have committed any serious crime. In these townships, where there is little to no police presence, such kangaroo courts are the only mechanism by which any form of swift justice can be found, providing a semblance of structure and security in otherwise unpredictable and dangerous territory.

While processing Charles' story, I wandered around the edge of the lot, taking extreme care not to wander too close to the border and risk copping a trespassing charge. This field was smaller than my school's and, though it had a few sprouts of grass, most of its top layer had been stripped back by the wind (which, in case you've forgotten, was relentless). In a far corner, I saw a

small group of third-years clustered on all fours digging at something. Among them was Kiana, a sweet, pigtailed girl who was missing most of her baby front teeth. When she saw me approaching, she ran in my direction carrying what looked like a stick. As she got closer, I realized she was holding what looked, to my (admittedly untrained) eye, to be a human femur. Brandishing the artifact gleefully, she called for my attention.

“Look what we found! We think there’s more! Come help us!”

I ushered the kids away to an area of the field that I hoped was less likely to be a burial site. Luckily, the rest of the day passed without incident. What had started as a wholesome, innocent outing had turned into a crisis of perspective. Though they felt like serious issues, any of my own problems were embarrassing in comparison; I winced, remembering the immense distress my dried-out contact lenses had caused me. With ease, these children compartmentalized the real-world hardships facing them, deriving genuine enjoyment from even the simplest pursuits. I’m not sure if Pastor Busby intentionally leveraged their naïveté and exuberance, but he certainly benefited from it, never more so than when class resumed the following week. The holiday had done the students no good, he declared; they’d already been lapsing towards sedentary lifestyles and, with the local youth athletics competition coming up, a rude awakening was in order if the kids hoped to podium in any of the events.

I was no expert, but, if anything, sloth and gluttony seemed to be the least of our worries: the kids looked closer to malnourishment than anything else. In most cases, their knobbly knees were the widest point of their legs. Nevertheless, the Pastor insisted that the children needed to be “whipped into shape.” Football and jump-roping - crowd favorites - were swiftly banned as they let, in Busby’s view, too many participants get away with standing around. Gym classes would now feature only simplistic - and compulsory for all - cardio-based training exercises. With plastic cones the only equipment at my disposal, my only recourse was to

make the students do laps of the field behind the school until they were exhausted. Miraculously, the kids didn't harbor any of the bitterness and resentment I'd have done were I forced to run relay races around the same dirt patch every day for two months straight - especially knowing that the baton we were passing could be my late cousin's fibula.



5

BAFANA BAFANA

Shortly afterwards, I had the chance to witness this enthusiasm for sport on a much larger scale when a friend and I got tickets to see the national soccer team. Such an event was a rare occasion: since hosting the World Cup in 2010, the country had struggled to find use for Cape Town's beautiful stadium, which had been purpose-built for the tournament. Because of the national politics behind the sport, Bafana Bafana (the nickname of the country's soccer team, meaning *The Boys*) play most of their matches around the heavily populated hubs of Johannesburg and Pretoria. The Western Cape, being whiter and less populated, ostensibly preferred rugby (which was the favored sport of the apartheid regime and had its own stadium nearby).

Tickets for most sporting and public events are usually purchased from the grocery store rather than online. As your cashier scans your loaf of bread or vegetables through the conveyor belt, you can ask if there are any available seats for the upcoming rugby, soccer, or cricket matches. To their credit, the offerings don't stop there. You can also ask for phone credit, whereupon the cashier prints out a code you can send to your cell carrier for 100 texts, or thirty minutes of call-time, or a few megabytes of data to browse the web. Alternatively, you can buy a

few days' worth of electricity: you give the cashier your address, and they print off a string of numbers for you to enter into your meter once back at home.

My buddy, a 20-something Ghanaian from Canada, was actually a semi-professional American football player; we'd struck up a friendship given our shared interest in sport. Our first interaction had been before school on my first morning, when I'd awoken to hear labored breathing coming from the small patio behind the house. I'd feared the knife-wielding robbers had learned of another volunteer house and were back to collect another haul while we were off at school. But we were safe, for now: it turned out to be Aaron, who was doing push-ups on the cement. I went outside to introduce myself and noticed he had a deck of cards to his right. He did a few more reps, then flipped over another card. A joker. He sat up for a few seconds. Upon seeing my confusion, he explained the rules.

"Whatever number you get, you do that many push ups. Aces and faces are supposed to be five each, but I usually do 10. Jokers are a 15 second rest."

"So you just do one or two of the cards per day?"

Not letting on the stupidity of my question, he graciously explained that, no, he did the full deck every morning. Shuffling the cards before each session was just Aaron's way of keeping things interesting as he tried to stay fit; he was here between seasons and would be rejoining the team in the new year. He invited me to join him for the rest of the deck but, seeing he was only about a third of the way through, I declined. 10 pushups would have been a bit much, let alone what I estimated to be 200. I'd never done much muscle-building; most of my exercise came from playing tennis, which was cardio-intensive and required more lower body strength. I wasn't scrawny, but felt particularly so next to him - by comparison, my chest looked concave enough to be used as a cereal bowl. Nevertheless, we decided to take the train into the city on the day of the match. Taking public transport was, in most cases, strongly discouraged, but we reckoned we

could hold our own, or at least give off that impression: we were both six feet tall and looked bulky enough (I wore a baggy hoodie to enlarge my silhouette).

The stadium was situated on the northwest corner of the peninsula, only a few hundred meters from the ocean. Seated in the northern half of the arena, you have a view of the Cape's mountains rising to the south. This stunning location, however, makes access inconvenient: from the train station, we still had to walk a few miles away on the far side of the city. But this was no trouble, really; the pilgrimage felt like an integral part of the experience. The main road through the city had been blocked off to vehicles and was packed with throngs of people who converged on the white glow of the elegant, circular stadium in the distance. I'd never seen anything like the passion of these fans' (almost all of whom were black and had flocked from the nearby townships), who were immensely grateful they finally had the chance to see their beloved national team.

Closer to the stadium, the crowd swelled, and the deafening klaxon of vuvuzelas intensified. Following the World Cup, these plastic trumpets, which had given the tournament its memorable - if distracting - locust drone-esque backing track, had been swiftly banned in stadiums worldwide. Here, though, roadside merchandise stalls still sold the controversial horns in every size and color.

As neither team had much to play for, it was essentially an exhibition match, finishing as a 0-0 draw with only a few shots on target. Uneventful by any standard. Not that you'd have known. Entire sections of the stadium seemed to have been reserved for coordinated fan groups with matching face paint and elaborate costumes and who sang and danced joyously in choreographed, rhythmic unison for the entirety of the match, paying no mind to what was happening on the pitch.

The fans surrounding me, however, were riveted. There was a hum of anticipation whenever Bafana had the ball, even in unthreatening positions. Early in the game, one of the players

overhit a pass to a winger, misjudging his kick and putting the ball out for a throw-in deep in Nigeria's half. Along with many others nearby, the man next to me, squeezed eyes shut and threw his head back to release a scream of pained frustration into the sky, reaching for his hair as if to pull it out in frustration. Before kick-off, he had told me that he and his friend had saved their money for a couple of weeks to buy tickets - for reference, these were the equivalent of about eight dollars at the time.

If a South African player drove the ball forward into the opposition half, the crowd rose, bouncing on restless feet, keenly awaiting the outcome of the foray forward. Each shot or cross, fruitless as they proved to be, produced shrieks of excitement. Thankfully, the Nigerians were by no means a ruthless attacking outfit; there were only a few occasions where they threatened the Bafana goal; had the opposition scored, I estimated there would have been a few hundred conniptions suffered amongst the home support.

It was impossible to not get caught up in these histrionics; not long into the match, every misplaced pass or shot elicited from me a tortured groan just like the crowd's. If a player slowed down an attack by lingering on the ball rather than releasing it to a teammate who'd made a clever forward run, I also threw my hands upwards in theatrical exasperation. If he at least attempted to play the ball to his teammate, we politely clapped in encouragement, appreciating his ambition. But heaven forbid he turn and pass backwards to the defenders or goalkeeper or, worse still, decided not to slide in and tackle a Nigerian for a loose ball. Upon such displays of cowardice, vitriol cascaded down towards the pitch.

Despite its best efforts, not even the trip home could spoil our evening. It was almost midnight, and so trains were no longer running. After several minutes of negotiation, a minibus driver offered a decent price to drive us back to Muizenberg. We got in and started off, but after a few minutes we noticed some strange behavior: the driver seemed distracted and fidgety, and made several phone calls, speaking in what sounded like Xhosa. Shortly,

he pulled into a parking lot, remarking to us the engine was broken. We would wait for his friend to arrive and take us the rest of the way. Aaron and I looked at each other, silently agreeing that we needed to escape. I opened the door, explaining I was just going for a pee behind a nearby bush. Aaron did the same, finding his own spot nearby. As soon as we were a safe distance we started sprinting, safely reaching a gas station we'd passed a few hundred meters back.

Our brush with abduction notwithstanding, I considered the evening a triumph. The feeling of community and raw emotion en masse was particularly cathartic because of my relationship to tennis, a sport so frustratingly obsessed with humorless, stiff-upper-lipped propriety. Usually only in private could I bemoan a player's lack of testicular fortitude and question his upbringing, but here I had thousands of friends with whom I could vent my frustrations; our hatred, of course, was forgotten seconds later as we praised the very same player, who'd totally redeemed himself by playing an intelligent pass. The dancing sections, meanwhile, had endured none of the tribulations we had, instead having used the match as a chance for unabashed celebration and national pride. Both philosophies were valid: the escapism and eternal optimism sport provides make it an irresistible pastime for any group, let alone those who've suffered as much as South Africa.

6

T.Í.A.

Broader societal issues aside, young kids being thrilled to go outside and play was simply a law of nature, one which I knew had nothing to do with me. But I didn't let this faze me. My being the teacher they were most excited to see was gratifying, and perfect fodder for my burgeoning martyr complex. But my lack of co-workers made my experience different to that of most other volunteers, who could share the load for child-wrangling and lesson-planning, and whose matching schedules meant they often stuck together round the clock and mobilized as large units. This was good news for the coffers of the local pubs, which hosted karaoke nights and drinks specials throughout the week, events to which the volunteers swarmed. Harmless, one might think, but unfortunately a pattern developed: for many, staying out all night for discounted drinks at Karaoke Wednesday took precedence over showing up to school on Thursday. Their revelry was eventually deemed excessive by the administration team, who found out and were forced to send out a memo reminding us that truancy was, decidedly, bad form: many of the smaller schools and orphanages depended heavily on these volunteers, so taking a day off to nurse a hangover could mean there would be nobody to prepare lunch for a few dozen starving toddlers. When further complaints

trickled in from the *actual* teachers at these schools and orphanages, the administrators realized they had been too lenient in their wording: the volunteers had stopped skipping work but were now turning up to school smelling so strongly of alcohol that the children had noticed. A second, sterner memo was circulated immediately.

Unfortunately, there were whispers of program administrators pocketing generous cuts from our fees (which were supposed to go solely towards our room and board). Concerns around the management's trustworthiness fostered a feeling of rebellious self-government among the young travelers, who had little respect for the company's authority. This meant the group had established a sort of sovereign micro-state, replete with its own social hierarchy, norms - even its own lingo.

It wasn't long before I noticed that a curious phenomenon had developed, whereby volunteers justified any hedonistic or libidinal excess by arguing that we were on a "once-in-a-lifetime" trip. Similarly, albeit the factors at play (cheap booze, nice weather, free time) certainly weren't endemic to the region, the catchphrase "T.I.A.!" - standing for This Is Africa - became popular amongst the group, who used the pithy one-liner in response to any hardships or inconveniences faced as well as a catch-all rationalization for anything not covered by the defense above. I'd heard many excuses in my time, but this was the first instance I'd heard anyone (barring Grandpa, I suppose) blame an entire continent. In any case, what remained of the Soul Sisterhood decided the acronym so perfectly summarized their trip that the only appropriate course of action was to get matching *T.I.A.* tattoos. I tried to point out that the phrase didn't carry a particularly positive connotation. Unsurprisingly, my concerns went unheeded; the appointment was made official.

After seeing the girls off to the parlor, the rest of us waited anxiously for their return, killing time by placing bets on where their acronyms would be. They were back soon - they only needed nine letters, after all. But when they revealed their new tattoos, we

saw that something had evidently been lost in translation. Looking back, this should have come as no surprise; South Africa has almost a dozen official languages. Instead of “T.I.A.,” there was “Tia” (sic). *Tia* translates to “aunt” in Spanish, meaning the girls now appeared to be a trio of bereaved nieces with tributes to a beloved - but mysteriously nameless - woman etched indelibly into their skin. With their flights booked for the next day, it was too late to make any alterations. Undeterred, several others scheduled appointments of their own, hoping to get matching tattoos of the karaoke bar’s logo. Though the girls’ wounds were still too raw for the irony to be appreciated, I would argue they had managed, unintentionally, to perfectly capture the true spirit of the phrase they so badly wanted on their bodies: T really *was* A.



I began to observe a niche forming adjacent to our little social ecosphere: in the same way that the local criminals had begun to take advantage of our predictability and knew where we ate, slept, and walked, so too had the local lotharios. It seemed like every bar and restaurant nearby was frequented by several men whose specific aim was to flirt with the female volunteers.

One of these men was lanky, colored, and known for his recognizable afro, but more so for his allegedly iconic rendition of Shaggy’s “It Wasn’t Me,” which was apparently so impressive it was the only song he ever needed to perform. Our afro’d one-trick pony would dutifully attend every Karaoke Wednesday. Like clockwork, he’d arrive as soon as the stage opened for singers - or rappers, do his three-minute act for the volunteers (who made up 90% of the audience), before descending into the (now raucous) crowd to schmooze and enjoy free drinks from his star-struck groupies for the remainder of the night.

There was another local with an afro of his own, though this one (the guy, that is) was white. A mellow, slightly scruffy kid, he went by the name of Poseidon. His routine was less polished than

the Shaggy impersonator's, but it gave him more regular access to the group. His meal ticket came from bringing over a handful of skunk every afternoon to hot-box the living room of the volunteers to whom he lived next door. From what I could tell, there'd been a non-compete agreement, and he was the volunteers' exclusive source of contraband; he must have made a killing - several of the volunteers I'd known for weeks and had never seen sober.

I stopped over at their house one evening after school, and by chance I witnessed the unveiling of his new shisha pipe, which we were invited to try. I'd never smoked from one and made a fool of myself by knocking it over - *twice* - in the span of ninety seconds, spilling the hot coals on the laps of those sitting cross-legged around the apparatus. In retrospect, I'll take some credit for admirable wingman work: my buffoonery allowed Poseidon to be the hero, reacting quickly to save the girls to his left and right from disaster. He deftly salvaged the glowing embers from their laps before calmly showing us his trick to diffuse the heat from his fingertips:

"Bunsen, as in *Robert Bunsen*, the guy who invented the burner, discovered this. Our earlobes have a unique chemical composition - they suck the heat from your skin if you've burned yourself. You just need to pinch them."

The group swallowed this story whole, each of them testing his theory even if they hadn't helped pick up any embers: "Wow, he's right! I can really feel it absorbing the warmth!"

Once the novelty of his new paraphernalia wore off, the evening took a bizarre twist. Someone asked if he had anything on offer more exciting than weed or hookah. He did, he said with a smirk, but if we wanted to partake we'd need to come with him back to his headquarters. I was cajoled into the expedition party and we wove through the back alleys of Muizenberg before arriving at his parents' house where, we were assured, nobody would be present. He pushed the door open and told us to follow him down a hallway. It was poorly lit, with only a few small gas-lantern sconces providing any illumination. What was striking,

beyond the walls' odd burnt orange color, was their décor: covering every inch were various animal traps, along with skulls, antlers, and taxidermied animals.

“Do you guys do much hunting?” I asked our host.

“Not really.” He looked bewildered, as if the question were a non sequitur.

We finally made it to his small bedroom, which became cramped as our party filed in. He rummaged through his contraband before producing what looked like a small eye-drop bottle.

“Mushroom extract. All you have to do is put some under your tongue, and your adventure begins.”

I looked up at the ceiling, where an antique bear trap was waiting open above me. The family had mounted several of these throughout the house. They were not appointed as kitschy chandeliers, suspended and strung with bulbs or candles. This would have been forgivable - if only barely. No; these traps, rusted and decaying, had been bolted directly to the ceiling, steel jaws agape, primed to spring into action. I was (and still am) no expert on hallucination, but I suspected if there was *any* “power of suggestion” aspect, wherein one’s surroundings influenced the drug’s effects, I’d be giving my vulnerable mind the worst possible *mise en scène* from which to start our “adventure.” I was unsettled even before touching a drop of the hallucinogen. It would have come as no surprise to feel a drop of warm saliva which had fallen from the trap above, or to see a tongue emerge from between the rows of oxidized teeth to expectantly lick large, invisible lips. But, after upsetting his shisha multiple times, I didn’t want to insult our gracious host further, so I accepted, but told him to give me the smallest possible dose. After we’d all been served and were waiting for the bitter, clear droplets to kick in, I suggested that we head down to the beach and stargaze; with any luck, we’d have one of those spiritual, cosmic awakenings he’d advertised and so often alluded to.

My *actual* motive was that I’d rather have been anywhere but sitting in his bedroom waiting for the tatty, mangled antelope

head to gain sentence and start recounting to us its life story - or worse, its *end-of-life* story:

Looking down upon us in our intoxicated paralysis, his glass eyes light up, having realized that he finally had a chance to retaliate. He might start by tearfully describing to his captive audience what it was like to take a hollow-point bullet through the spinal cord; the impact had shattered several vertebrae and instantly rendered him paraplegic. He'd then go on to describe the harrowing experience of dragging his dangling, lifeless back legs for miles through the savannah while hemorrhaging a quart of blood a minute.

Mercifully, my beach proposal was well received, so things never got this far. In any case, I don't think I'd taken a big enough dose of the mushroom extract to experience any of its intended effects, so I left early. But this may have been for the best: however beautiful they are, the beaches in South Africa can be hotspots for crime, especially at night. Two members of the group who stayed out after us fell asleep in the sand, only to wake up with their belongings stolen.

I never saw Poseidon again, but can only assume he's still in town and working his magic on fresh-faced explorers, talking them into signing up for his high-risk, low-budget Ayahuasca retreats.





Another opportunist enlisted the help of his own furry friend. This one was living, but only slight less immobile. One afternoon, a few of us decided to go into the city. As we discussed logistics, two of the newer girls chimed in to say they knew a driver whom they'd already called upon a few times and was cheap and reliable. Their phones were out of minutes, however, so I offered to call him with mine. I dialed his number as they read it out, but as it started to ring I realized the girls hadn't told me his name.

"Oh, right, sorry... It's Mr. Lollipop."

I hung up immediately. "Pardon?"

"He's the Lollipop Cab! I know, it's kind of weird. We asked him about it, and he said that, because there's so many taxi drivers who rob or kidnap their customers, he wanted to be someone seen as trustworthy and welcoming - and what does everyone like? Lollipops! It's even what he named his dog. This way, he starts out on a good note with everybody he picks up. Think about it, it makes sense: you like candy, don't you?" I needn't worry, these girls assured me; he was a decent man. I asked if they knew his name.

“Yeah, we already told you - Mr. Lollipop!”

“No, his *real* name.”

They didn’t, it turned out. But why did it matter when, after all, “He brings little Lollipop everywhere he goes. Would a criminal really drive around with a lap dog?”

This *did* seem unlikely, I’d grant them that. But this guy wasn’t your average criminal, I thought. Alas, my vote was outnumbered (as per usual), and we summoned the man who had named himself after his pet. After a few minutes, he arrived. He was heavy-set and middle-aged. Two for two so far. But his van was silver, not white, had windows, and was far less rusty than I’d expected. So this balanced things out. As we piled in, we saw a small white dog, some type of terrier, laying across the man’s lap. One of the girls, a Lollipop virgin like myself, was instantly enamored.

“She’s so cute! What a little princess. Do you take her everywhere?”

“Yes, she’s my baby. She’s paralyzed from the middle of her back down, you see, so riding in the car gives her a chance to see the world. You can pet her if you want, she loves girls like you.”

She takes after her daddy, I estimated; his was clearly a ploy to get the girls to reach into the Danger Zone, and I was about to suggest as much when he began to release a delicate, high-pitched whimper. I noticed the poor creature’s wet, beady eyes looking up at her eponymous chauffeur while her lifeless back legs dangled off the side of his lap, and realized the plaintive, pitiful whining was coming from her. It was difficult not to feel a pang of sympathy; I had half a mind to reach up and pet them both as a show of support. As we approached the city, one of the girls, noticing a roadside billboard for a shampoo brand, mentioned how long her hair (the girl’s, that is, not the crippled dog’s) had grown since arriving in Africa months before; she’d been too busy to find a salon. Mr. Lollipop, whose gray hair was shaved into a military flat top, interrupted. “Ha! I *wish* I could grow mine out! I’d look silly with anything else. All of us had to get the same ‘Dutch’ haircut

for decades, it's how you can recognize all of us Afrikaners who were in the military!"

Considering the draconian regime that had governed the country for so many years, we didn't ask him to elaborate on his military exploits, and instead steered the conversation back to safer waters: the crippled Lollipop's favorite snacks and television programs.



While Lollipop and the others lurked on the outskirts, the real threats to security came from within our ranks. After I'd been there for a couple of months, the group managers reshuffled us to accommodate an influx of new volunteers; I'd been bunking in one of the small, co-ed bungalows, but was now to move down the road to a small flat that had just become available. It was owned by a local family who'd built a second story above their garage. We'd have to keep the noise down in the evenings and weekends, but they had a small pool we were welcome to use and the weather was starting to get warmer, so it was a decent trade-off. One of my new flat-mates had just arrived from New York: Greg, an ex-frat boy who now worked in finance.

"Gap year? You left school?" he said, after I told him the purpose of my travels. "Screw that - I loved college. My dad got me into NYU, he's on the board of directors. No chance I would've got in otherwise. But it was amazing. *Crazy* parties - we were on the cutting edge. What music do you listen to?"

He plowed on before I could respond. "All the stuff that's popular right now - Kanye, Drake, all those guys. We knew about them *years* before anyone else. We'd have warehouse parties going for two days straight. Just going *wild*."

I asked what had brought him to South Africa.

"The kite surfing, mainly - this is one of the best spots in the world. Signing up for this program was easier than finding my

own apartment.” I was sure the orphans would be happy to hear this.

“Whoa, kite-surfing? Sounds cool.”

“Yeah, I’ve been doing it for a while. It’s an expensive hobby. I’ve sunk thousands into it. That board alone was a couple grand,” He gestured to the conspicuously shaped luggage leaning against the wall, which now made more sense. “But once you get good, it’s a blast. Anyway, what’s it like here? And what’s the deal with the girls?”

There was a decent crop, I said, but they’d be ten or twelve years his junior. He was unperturbed.

“Sweet. I’m looking for a change of pace. My girl back in New York is cool, but you know what they say: ‘For every hot girl, there’s a guy out there who’s tired of her.’ So that’s kind of where I’m at. I’ll marry her eventually, but I told her I have some stuff to get out of my system first. She’s chill, though. She gets it.”

I shuddered for the sake of the girls next door, who seemed most likely to be on the receiving end of whatever *stuff* he needed to evacuate from his system. Sure enough, on his first weekend he secured a young woman (or what sounded like one through the gossamer-thin wall). After they finished, I heard her scuttle out of the apartment and back to the other volunteer building. In the morning, when I went to the bathroom to brush my teeth, I saw a used condom draped over the toilet seat, with its wrapper floating in the water. Greg was already awake and sitting in the kitchen.

“Hey, man,” I said, pointing to the toilet, “That wouldn’t be yours, would it?” *I sure hoped so; there were only two of us living in the apartment.*

“Oh. My bad,” he said, grabbing the soggy latex and fishing the wrapper out of the water. “I tried to flush it last night, but couldn’t find the light switch. What a night, though, man. This trip is going to be awesome. What about you? How many of ‘em have you hooked up with so far?”

“None yet. I haven’t been here very long. There are a couple of girls I’d definitely like to talk to, but it’s kind of tough. There’s

always a big group around, you never get to chat to anybody one on one.”

“Screw that. Quit being a wuss! You’re a good-looking kid - you could get any of these girls. Just look at me, I’m no model. No six pack. Big nose. It doesn’t even matter what you’re packing. I’m fortunate enough to be well endowed, but I have friends who aren’t, and a couple of them have gotten with hundreds of chicks, too. Anyone can do it, I’m telling you.”

“Thanks, that’s good to hear. But I like to take my time with that kind of thing - it’s draining to go out every night.”

“Come on, man, that attitude sucks. You could be so much cooler.”

I agreed, and started getting ready for school.

7

ROAD TRIP

After Greg had been there for a few weeks, I was miraculously deemed cool enough to make the cut (or, more likely, I presented a chance to further split the cost) for a weeklong road trip along the Garden Route, the country's southern coast known for its stunning land- and sea-scapes.

Even just accessing the route is perilous and melodramatic, instantiating for prospective adventurers that what lies beyond is a world of its own. The peninsula, and especially its more glamorous attractions, is a curated, well-worn circuit. Barring the cape's baboons, true wilderness has in large part been beaten back. On the mainland, however, this is not the case. It does not take long for this sense to become palpable. You can feel the rules changing - for better or worse - with every kilometer you put between yourself and the city.

You must first cross through the Cape flats, a smoggy, featureless lowland which is itself an incongruence given the striking topography to its east and west. It's not a township, not quite, but it's bleak nonetheless: a low sprawl of industrial parks and low-income housing; walls of unpainted cinderblock, graffiti, tire-less cars. The highway cutting through this purgatory offers an exit to the airport, but otherwise discourages deviation. Drifters and

hawkers wait alongside the road as lone operators or in small teams, with mesh bags of (likely stolen) fruit slung over their shoulders. They race each other to your window at each traffic light, of which there's an excruciating overabundance - all red, of course - and separated by, at most, fifty yards. When you finally break free, the road gradually inclines in a sweeping curve, as if to build momentum, bidding a prolonged farewell to the cape before climbing up the slope, where it eventually braves the pass and slingshots you into the wild beyond.

Just before you cross over, you have a view of almost the entire peninsula back across the flats and False Bay. This captivating perspective brings into view the full scope of the Cape and its mountains. It's really no wonder why we flock to such spectacles. It's a primal pull; their ineffable power and scale, prerequisites for any natural wonder, work in conjunction to humble us. The more effortless their collaboration, the more sublime its effect, the more readily we accept our cosmic irrelevance and forget the trivialities of the human condition. Seeing the Milky Way on a clear night provides perhaps the most powerful example, but, even then, there remains the mental barrier of our myopic understanding of the cosmos. Our earthly natural wonders thus serve to bring the immensity of time and space to us in a less abstract, more comprehensible way, allowing even the most secular to dabble in spirituality without having to undertake the unseemly process of suspending rational thought.

There's empowerment to be found within this: the extinguishing of ego and the resultant depth of cosmic understanding allows for more grounded interaction with the world around us. But this still leaves us with the million-dollar question: how do we ensure the perspective gained during these transcendent yet ephemeral experiences remains our prevailing pattern of thought? How can we hold on to this newfound humility once we've climbed down the mountain and resumed our normal lives?

Lying on the bottom bunk on the first night of the road trip, I wrestled with these existential dilemmas. My real concern,

however, was just a few feet above me, where Greg was undertaking an exploration of his own, albeit of a more, well, *tangible* subject: that is, the girl he'd talked into joining us.

He was a red wine aficionado, so the first stop on the trip had been at a vineyard outside the city where, between us, we'd finished a few bottles by the late afternoon. The revelry continued into the night at a wine bar near the hostel. There, several more liters had been imbibed, the bulk of which had been split between him and the young woman.

I'd had a couple of glasses of wine with them but had also been talked into partaking in some of Poseidon's skunk weed by the remaining member of our group: a young, nervous Australian. Nervous at the time, that is, not particularly by nature; he had met a man online who lived in the town we were passing through, and this was to be his first date with a member of the same sex. Our friend's first date, that is - I can't speak for the other guy. Technically, I suppose, it was to be his *second* date, if we count my roleplaying as mysterious provocateur to help him rehearse. Alas, for as much I wanted to help, there was a predetermined ceiling on how much tension I could help us muster up, rendering me a somewhat inutile stand-in. Fortunately, my partner was far more concerned with preparing himself physically: this date might be the first time he could advance things physically, so he hadn't wanted to leave things to chance, confiding to me that he was banking heavily on the weed's muscle relaxing properties to kick in. The strain was called "Swazi," as in the erstwhile Swaziland, where it'd allegedly been harvested. Despite our salesman's marketing efforts, the weed's exotic name wasn't an indicator of its quality. It turned out the Swazi, cut with its grimy seeds and stems, as well as the boxed wine costing less than a dollar a liter, made for a nauseating combination, for me at least; I'd ended up needing to throw up fifteen minutes after my first hit.

With our rehearsal - and my night - prematurely over, I retreated to our shared hostel room, collapsing in my lower bunk, where I laid for a few hours in the dark, too sick and disoriented

to fall asleep. I heard the lovers (the straight ones) stumble in sometime after midnight. They clambered into the top bunk and had either not noticed me, assumed I was sleeping, or (most likely) didn't care either way. Briefly - *all too briefly* - it seemed their momentum stalled, or perhaps had even sputtered out entirely: the lovers settled into a still silence, and for a few fleeting minutes I thought I might be spared. Perhaps one of them had blacked out: *it sure had been a lot of Merlot...*

Alas, this lull was naught but a period of strategic assessment, a gathering of resources, the drawback of water before the tsunami, et cetera. Presently, the couple began to engage in what sounded like an attempt at tender foreplay. Credit to him, I suppose, for giving it a go; reports of romance being dead had evidently been greatly exaggerated. This only lasted for a few seconds, however, and once the breathing patterns of my associates changed and our English-nosed friend's trademark warthog grunting began, I knew it was too late for action. I'd made my bed, so to speak; my only recourse was to bite the metaphorical pillow and wait for the storm to pass.

And it did pass, ultimately, whereupon he almost immediately fell into a comatose slumber. The lady-friend, realizing that her lover had no intention of sharing the bunk with her for the remainder of the night, climbed down and slunk off to her own room. Thankfully, I managed to fall asleep despite his cavernous snores reverberating through the bedframe.

The next morning, I queried him about his snoring's impressive volume and its unique, guttural bass.

"Oh, yeah. Shoulda warned you. Whenever I have red wine, 'specially if it's a good vintage, I snore loud as hell... and even louder if I get laid. But I don't know - I've always felt like it isn't on me to do anything about it. I'm already asleep at that point, so if you wake me up, you'll just piss me off. What's the point, y'know? If you're annoyed, it's better to just get out of the way."

Perhaps I was still under the tranquilizing influence of last

night's Swazi, but he was starting to make sense: who was *I* to ruin his night's sleep just because I was too delicate?

We drove onwards later that morning, stopping first to pick up the Australian, who'd ended up staying over at his date's house. The stranger had been much older and fatter than his pictures had suggested but, as our friend had already readied himself to be taken up the Khyber, so to speak, he'd felt it would be wasteful to not make the most of the evening in that regard. And besides; his date (who was also shorter and balder than anticipated) had paid for his drinks, after all. We didn't ask for further details, and began heading east towards Mossel Bay.



To our right was the vastness of the Atlantic (which, beyond Cape Agulhas, the continent's southernmost point, becomes the Indian). On the left, closer in the foreground, were rolling hills carpeted by bright yellow mustard farms or soft purple lavender. These stretched back to snow-capped mountain ranges on the horizon. As you get further east, these cultivated areas give way to lush, untouched temperate forest. You continue on like this for hours, taking in these great expanses of field, hill, mountain and sea.

There is something rewarding about being forced to slow down on occasion. We're wired to seek novelty and convenience, it's true, but as our attention spans get shorter and travel and communication have become nearly instant, the way we see the world and relate to gratification, has also become distorted. In just a few hours, and having taken fewer than a mile's worth of steps, we can wake up on the other side of the world. We don't even have the patience to sit through the introduction of our television shows now; worse, this is indulged by our streaming services, who give us a "skip" button. Not only is slowing down discouraged, it's impractical, unsafe, and often more expensive: unless you're doing it for its own sake like Paul Theroux, it would be patently ridiculous to say

you'd rather travel to Cape Town from Europe overland, or even by sea. (We have cruises, but even these are designed to cater to our increasingly episodic experience; dropping its passengers off for a half-day excursion before collecting them again before a buffet dinner aboard the cruise liner, which is fitted with ballroom, casino, Olympic swimming pool, amusement park, and so on).

This isn't just grouchiness; there are genuine neurological benefits to resisting automation and mindless convenience and repetition. The mundanity of our isolated, computerized modern lifestyles actually rob us of time. As the cliché goes, you blink and your time's up. This is because we spend years and even decades on auto-pilot. Even (and in fact especially) if this time is spent in relative comfort, the repetitiveness means our brains are allowed to disengage.

Forcing ourselves to try new things and slow down is how we make sure our brains stay engaged. It's in these moments that our perception of time slows down, as our brains are forced to process and react to new stimuli and, in the process, forge new memories. This is why you can remember where you were when the Twin Towers fell, for example, or where you were when you first heard your favorite album. There's an Adam Sandler movie where he gets a remote that lets him fast forward through all the boring or difficult parts in life. He realizes, too late, that once he skips something, he's never able to experience it again. As an old man, he comes to realize that he's lost everyone he was close to, has no memories to show for it, and would give anything to experience boredom, frustration, and stress again. In moderation, these are helpful allies in the quest to extract every last drop from our time here.

The Garden Route, seeming to appreciate this, thwarts our love of instant gratification by offering no definitive end-point. There is no shortcut; to be enjoyed, the journey must be endured. There are several small towns and cities along the coast, each with their own claims to fame, but even the stretches of uninhabited

wilderness refuse to be ignored: though its mysterious panoramas seem unapproachable, it's here where the Route offers more concentrated doses of exhilaration.

One farm, for example, offers the chance to actually *ride* one of the ostriches you see as you drive past the property. Our first contact, however, would be early the next day (and, in my opinion, less terrifying): rather than racing ostriches, we had booked a shark cage dive.

"You'll drop anchor just after sunrise - that's when the sharks are most active," the lady had said over the phone. To my ears, that sounded like the one time of day we definitely *shouldn't* be paying them a visit, but the crew weren't telling me how to do *my* job (unqualified, skiving gym teacher), so I gave them the same courtesy.

We arrived the evening before the dive and settled into our rather unique accommodation down on the beach: a retired sleeper train had been brought in and converted to a hostel, its rooms overlooking the bay. We woke up to a cool, gray morning and walked through the fog over to the dive company's office. We started with an orientation meeting, during which the crew explained how the trip would work and listed the various "dos and don'ts" which included things like: *Do* keep your limbs inside the cage while you're in the water and *Don't not* keep your limbs inside the cage while you're in the water.

Despite these repeated warnings, the crew made a concerted effort to illustrate the huge amount of respect and compassion they had for the sharks. These dives, they emphasized, were designed with education, rather than thrill-seeking, in mind. The crew's main goal was to lessen the stigma these animals suffer from while raising awareness of all the *good* they do. "Sharks aren't predators," the crew said, "they're simply *misunderstood*." We divers had "nothing to be scared of." "Statistically," they noted, "you're more likely to die of the Black Plague than be bitten by a shark."

Their slideshow ended with an announcement that we were going to be served a buffet breakfast. A *what!?*

Their plan was staring us in the face: what was about to be wheeled out was our last meal, intended to fatten us up and coat us with as much grease as possible before trapping us in a cage and lowering us into a frothing, churning feeding frenzy. But how had these sharks convinced these humans to cooperate? Extortion, maybe: organized fish crime had kompromat on the dive crew, and was now leaning on them to lure other humans into the water as bait.

Or, maybe Big Shark had grown fed up with their proud species' reputation as heartless murderers and wanted to rehabilitate its brand. They'd pumped money into their propaganda wing and had found humans willing to take a huge payday to act as PR mouthpieces and help whitewash the animals' image. If so, they had a long road ahead. I could only imagine the resentment the fish would've had for Steven Spielberg, who almost single-handedly poisoned the well against them. The misinformation spread by Jaws caused (I'm sure the sharks would feel to be) nearly irreparable damage.

In the unlikely event they *weren't* involved behind the scenes, these sharks wouldn't have believed their luck. They'd been genetically engineered with ruthless, painstaking efficiency over hundreds of millions of years, built to handle some of the world's most brutal ecosystems and fight for their lives to earn every last morsel of sustenance. Inexplicably, though, we weren't planning to test their faculties in the slightest. Nope; we were *literally* buttering ourselves up and locking ourselves underwater for these highly specialized enforcers of natural selection to have their way with. The dive crew may have had respect for these sharks, but this felt like a bridge too far. This was more than an olive branch; we were being presented on a platter, as reparations. This was some sick inversion of "fish in a barrel."

Presently, an assistant emerged from a back room carrying a large tray of fresh bacon, and several men at the table behind ours

cheered. After breakfast, which I declined (“No, no, nothing for me, thanks. If - sorry - *when* we get back I’ll pick at some of the leftovers”), the crew handed out our diving masks and explained how things would work. In groups of three or four, we would clamber into the cage (which was, for reference, roughly the size of three medium-size coffins side by side) as it hung over the side of the boat. They’d then latch the roof and lower the cage into the Atlantic until we were almost completely submerged, leaving just enough space to raise our heads above the water to breathe. For insulation from the horribly cold water, we were given wetsuits almost an inch thick and thus incredibly buoyant; to see the sharks, you’d need to push yourself underwater using the steel bar which ran across the inside of the enclosure at chest level. This segment of pipe was a repeated point of reference on the “dos and don’ts” list. For example: while under water, *do* hold on to the bar with both hands at all times. And its corollary: for the love of God, *don’t* use the outer cage itself to push yourself under the water, because your fingers and hands would be exposed to the [heartbreakingly misunderstood] killers on the outside.

The sharks approached the boat on over 80% of these trips, but sometimes they just wouldn’t show up or would leave after only a minute or two. In such an event, we were assured, the company would give out waivers to any unsatisfied customers. To me, the animals’ potential truancy didn’t sound too bad a prospect, but for employees whose livelihoods depended on these sharks’ attendance, their unreliability wasn’t ideal. Apparently, this refund policy had started after one group of particularly disgruntled clients had been aggressive towards the crew for failing to summon any great white sharks to the side of the little speedboat during their ride. As assured of the sharks’ absence as those disgruntled customers sounded, I noticed they’d refrained from provoking the crew until back on dry land.

As our information session concluded, we stood up. The dive company’s office was on a hill and had a good vantage point, and I looked out over the ocean waiting in the bay below. The overcast

morning had turned the water a dispiriting, charcoal gray. I spotted a rocky outcrop perhaps half a mile out to sea, with a small, flock of birds circling forebodingly above. I pointed out to it. “We’d better be careful not to crash, we definitely wouldn’t want to be stranded out there.”

“Well, that’s Shark Island, so actually that’s *exactly* where we’re headed. The seals use those rocks to rest when they’re not fishing in the waters below. The sharks just wait in the water for the seals to get hungry, then hunt them when they jump in.”

The captain chuckled as if we, who were planning to first incite and then submerge ourselves inside a feeding frenzy, could *all* agree the seals were too stupid for their own good. The crew walked us down to the docks, and I chatted to the captain along the way. When I asked how the past week’s dives had gone, he gave us some disquieting news.

“The main boat suffered some damage on its last trip out to sea.” He gave no further detail on the incident, a silence which was, in my opinion, deafening. None of us dared to inquire further before he continued,

“Anyway, you’ll be in *this* one today.”

He nodded to what I’d presumed was a dinghy for one of the actual boats surrounding us on the pier.

“Will there be a cage?” I asked, noting the suspicious absence of one.

“Of course. My assistant Marcus is bringing one of our spares down now. The main one is being repaired. *That* suffered some damage, too.” He noticed my dismay. “But don’t worry, the backup works fine.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“And the spare boat actually has a bigger cooler for the snacks!”

I nodded, trying to feign some confidence. “Oh, awesome, what kind of snacks?”

But I paid no attention to his answer, as I was already getting queasy at the prospect of being trapped for hours on a bargain-bin

dinghy with a dozen terrified strangers. I tend towards irritability on my best days, and I'm so prone to seasickness that a few spins around on an office chair leave me doubled over doing Lamaze breathing. Yet here I was, here we were, each paying hundreds of dollars to cram ourselves onto a migrant boat and float out over shark-infested waters. And so the worries flooding my mind were far more pressing than knowing what refreshments were stocked in the cooler; chiefly, I was wondering if I could ask my real question: how much panic-induced diarrhea my wetsuit could absorb before the excess would spray from the neck, wrists, and ankles, further saturating the waters.

The first mate and another crewman eventually returned, lugging the backup cage with them. I couldn't help noticing the duct tape wrapped around several of the frame's load-bearing joints; this slapdash arrangement didn't fill me with confidence. I recognized the oft-mentioned bar running through the middle of the cage, which for some reason looked sturdier than any part that the two-ton sharks might bite. In fact, the outer (and only) barrier between us and the sharks seemed to be merely some sort of chicken wire; *I* could have bitten through it if push came to shove. I broached this issue to the captain.

"Don't worry," he said, "they won't actually be trying to get *through* the cage - it's just there for them to bounce off if they come too close. They'll be much more focused on the bait." Phew!

We boarded the dinghy and set sail for Shark Island. After a 20 minute journey, the captain cut the motor 50 meters or so from the rocky outcrop, and the crew tipped the rickety cage overboard and lowered it into the water. One aspect of the experience I hadn't anticipated was the acrid stench of seal feces and rotting fish; as the miasma washed over us, I immediately felt less sympathy for the island's mammal community. After the hours of buildup we learned, to our disappointment, that each group was only going to be get about five minutes under the water. Although this didn't sound like much at all, the captain then

added that we could get out earlier if we decided we'd seen enough. *Screw that*, I thought, *I'm getting my money's worth* - to my ears, cutting the expensive dive short was unconscionable.

As the roof hung open, a crewman asked which group wanted to go first. One of the families on board seemed keen and volunteered themselves. They zipped up their wetsuits, strapped on their masks and queued to clamber down into the cage. As we watched on, I realized much of the putrid smell was coming from buckets the crew had brought on board, which were filled with what looked something like a fermented chowder. This blend of fish offcuts and innards was to be dumped into the surrounding water to attract the nearby sharks. These trips ran twice a day, six times a week. Forget needing to pick out one part blood in a billion parts water; these sharks had a pretty cushy gig.

It looked as if the multiple buckets of sludge would serve as more than sufficient bait, so it was confusing to see the first mate reach into a larger tub and retrieve the disembodied head of a bluefin tuna. Though roughly the size of a dinner plate, the head would receive no such dignified presentation: the crew would pierce its skull with a large hook connected to a thick rope, and it would then be tossed overboard into the grisly waters as a large lure on a rudimentary fishing line. Initially, this seemed like overkill, nothing beyond theatrics for the passengers' benefit, but we then learned the head was integral. Besides sweetening the deal for any shark unconvinced by today's flavor of swill, it would provide a focal point for the predators to target, making sightings more likely. The crew, with a better view from above the water, would slowly pull in the rope and fish head back to the boat. When, or if, a shark seemed like it was going to make a pass at the lure, the captain would tell the cage divers to go under and try to catch a glimpse.

Our group was the last to dive. We'd watched on for half an hour or so as the others went. They'd all seemed relatively satisfied, but we hadn't seen the sharks too clearly from the deck, where they'd appeared only as flashes of lead gray beneath the

water. With the crew's help, we lowered ourselves into the container. If we had had any doubts about whether the comically exaggerated thickness of our wetsuits was really necessary, these were quieted as soon as any exposed skin made contact with the biting-cold water. We were distracted by the heavy clang of the cage slamming shut above us. It was only at this point did I register that the cage, the roof of which rose more than a foot out of the water, even *needed* a lockable roof. I wondered whether the company had first embarked without such apparatus before learning a fatal, gruesome lesson. It now struck me how Icarian this all was. We, with everything to lose, were showing up to the casino (the Sharks' eponymous island, as if the allegory needed any help) and spinning a great big wheel of misfortune whose "*BLOODBATH*" wedge, though only a sliver, was still very much a possible outcome. Perhaps we ought not to so hastily dismiss the mantra of the paranoid: *you* have to get lucky every day. Your enemy only has to get lucky *once*. They might not win today, and they might not win tomorrow... but one day, they will.

In any case, it was too late to back out. And it was an incredible thrill to see these animals so close. The sharks mostly swam parallel to the boat when making their passes at the tuna head, which let us appreciate their scale, their impressive bulk and length, their raw power as they muscled their way through their target. If any of us had a hankering to mingle with the local seals, these were extinguished by the tuna who with his mouth hanging open, and lifeless, glazed eyes, served as a gruesome bellwether of life in the open water. Occasionally, as the crew pulled in the rope, his head became wedged in the cage. It was here, having survived another cast, that he found moments - however brief - of peace, before eventually succumbing once again to the rope's pull. On the most recent occasion, he was gazing upwards, the right side of his head against the metal. His most recent foray had only cost him a small chunk of flesh from his forehead, as well as half an eyeball. *Could have been worse*, I thought. Shreds of his severed neck and esophagus hung loosely, swaying gently in the current.

Alas, his respite would soon be cut short: the yanking from above would intensify, the crew now working like a tug-of-war team to retrieve his disembodied head which, once reeled in, would be hoisted and swung around like a lasso - five, six, seven nauseating rotations- before being flung back out to sea. If the tuna's black, glassy eyes weren't lifeless, they might have noticed at the sailors' feet a bucket filled with half a dozen more heads like his own, ready for when the sharks eventually shredded his beyond recognition (or made off with it entirely).

Once our group had grown accustomed to the water and witnessed several of the sharks' passes, I decided I'd try something new. I'd been filming with my waterproof sport camera up until now, but I wanted to try to capture the moment with some artistic flair. The plan was to time my next video so that, when the captain told us to duck underwater to see the passing shark, I'd turn back towards the camera, capturing my face in the foreground with the animal spanning across the background: a shark selfie, a rare trophy indeed. The animal would need to cooperate, but even this might not be enough. They were difficult to spot even in ideal conditions, and the underwater visibility here was terrible. The crew's continual dumping of the soupy fish intestines had done little to help matters; the water around us was now a murky, fecal brown. Frankly, it looked as if the seals had adapted to have some sort of emergency smokescreen, like the escape mechanism of an octopus, but with enema bile instead of ink. Nevertheless, one of the crew managed to see a shark approaching.

"Down!"

I hurriedly forced myself beneath the surface, spun to face the boat and held out the camera to point towards me and the open ocean in the background. I grinned and waved at the lens, praying a shark was visible in the background so my video wouldn't leave me looking like a halfwit. This is, however, exactly what happened, albeit in an unexpected way. I heard a thunderous, crunching clank, and felt the cage and boat reverberate. I assumed

the crew had hooked the cage up to the pulley system without warning; I couldn't believe their impatience - and before I'd even gotten my selfie! I looked to my left to see if the rest of the group shared my annoyance. But I couldn't see Greg's face. Between us was what looked like a long, dark-gray traffic cone. It took me a split second to realize our fourth wall had been broken - shattered, rather - by a probing great white. I remember being struck by just how far into the cage he had been able to intrude: well beyond his eyes, perhaps a full foot and a half inside the cage. My brief indignance towards the crew now became high-pitched shrieking for them to please, please, "get us the hell out," followed by profuse apologizing for ever suspecting they didn't have our best interests at heart. Only once you're wrapped in a towel and back on the dinghy (or, on second thought, the shore) can you appreciate the drama of what's happened. In a way, I'm glad I picked *that* moment to not look; I didn't have to watch my life flash before my eyes upon seeing a killing machine storm up from below with impeccable precision, its sole intent being to mutilate each of us in turn.

Once back on land, we watched my video dozens of times in succession, pausing it frame by frame. Terrifyingly, the shark was only visible for a split second before entering the cage, offering a stark reminder that, no matter how advanced our sentience, how self-satisfied we are in our climate-controlled, coddled bubbles, we're rendered comically helpless by these creatures when in their territory.



Somehow, our day was not yet over - far from it, in fact. The others were planning to bungee jump that very afternoon; there'd been a scheduling mix-up, and today was their only opportunity. If I hadn't planned on joining them *before* being three inches away from losing my hand to a probing shark, I could now reconsider. The idea of jumping off a bridge, however, remained diffi-

cult to digest. This was partially because of the prospect itself (which, of course, was terrifying) but more due to the carsickness I was suffering on the three-hour journey. Eventually, however, I forced myself to confront the decision. To date, I'd never been drawn to the idea of bungee jumping, skydiving, or anything of the sort; these sorts of bucket-list activities had always seemed irredeemably stupid. Then there was my fear of heights, which went hand in hand with my particular dislike of that awful feeling of your stomach dropping (yes, thank you, I am *completely* aware some people enjoy this). Other scruples included my near-zero faith in South Africa's legal equipment standards for this type of thing.

As we drove, I watched as the landscape grew wild and imposing. It was as if the mountains from the north had arrived at the coast but, in their gargantuan, straining effort, had split into fissures. These great forested valleys ran perpendicular to the coastline, while the road remained parallel and was thus punctuated by bridges that spanned the ravines below. One of these felt particularly wide; as we crossed, I asked Greg how much longer the trip would be.

"I don't know, I think my GPS is broken. The pin on the map for 'Bloukrans Bungee' is right here. Actually, it's telling me we've gone past it already." But there were no buildings or people in sight. Our questions were resolved as we came to the end of the bridge; a small sign on the side of the road informed us we should pull off onto a dirt road and circle back around. The only pictures I'd seen of the bungee venue had been taken on clear days, so I hadn't recognized the valley on this foggy, gray day. The company's headquarters and a few lookout points on the edge of the ravine, sat slightly further inland than the bridge, giving observers a view of the bridge with the ocean in the background. Those who signed up would jump from a platform built on the underside of the very bridge we just crossed.

Despite my nausea, I now didn't want the drive to end. We were heading willfully into an abyss, and every instinct I had was

telling me this was reckless and irresponsible. Bridges aren't meant for socializing or loitering. The opposite, in fact: their intended purpose is to safely carry you from one bit of terra firma to another. That's it. One wouldn't double back for any reason other than to test their luck. There was no benefit to us lingering around - what could we possibly accomplish? Just think of the bad karma we'd accrue from a display of such ingratitude towards this feat of engineering. If we were *meant* to descend and explore the valley, you better believe we'd be down there already. The government would have airlifted down a fleet of mixer trucks and told them to start pouring. We'd have all sorts of commerce and industry: gas stations, Chinese buffets, and gentlemen's clubs, all serviced by a brand-new Tarmac road going down one side of the crevasse and up the other. Nope. As people much smarter than us had realized long ago, the only way to deal with this particular geological death trap was to bypass it.

I'd been told this was the highest bridge bungee in the world. Conventional wisdom dictates you oughtn't throw yourself from *any* perfectly safe structures; this advice increases in urgency in proportion to the building's size, and is unanimously agreed in cases where the structure considers its prolific height a point of pride. Where on earth had we ever found the temerity to ridicule lemmings, I wondered. How could I look one of those poor little fellows in the eye again? Not that I'd ever seen one, but still.

We watched on from the viewing platform as a group took their turns. Without having done so, it's impossible to internalize what falling 100 meters at freefall speed feels like, but seeing it in person gave enough of an idea: it was horrifying. Once its slack has been used, the rubber cord eases the jumper downwards. It then contracts, yanking them upwards into zero-g whereupon they become possessed. Even those who were graceful and under control as they leapt were utterly robbed of their physical agency and rag-dolled, Exorcist-style, darting chaotically through the air with head lolling limp and hair and limbs hanging down. This was deeply unsettling; I suspect we have some primal intuition

telling us that if you see such a phenomenon in the wild, the victim is probably dead (or about to be) and *you're* probably next.

Usually, having a list of concerns have as robust would see me abstain from the proceedings in question. I was as surprised as anyone to find myself attempting to conjure some positives for balance. But there wasn't much of a case in favor. There was the notion that I had the chance to tempt fate more in one eight-hour period than most people voluntarily would in a lifetime. But, given that I'm neither an adrenaline junky nor a bucket-lister, this didn't particularly sway me. In the end, all I managed to drum up was the thought of how cool Pierce Brosnan had looked when jumping off the dam in *Goldeneye*. This was surprisingly persuasive; you can't get much cooler than that. Greg weighed in as I was mulling things over back in the parking lot.

"Come on, dude. Get tough. Think about all the people we just watched do the jump. All ages, shapes, and sizes. If they can do it, you have no excuse."

I had no rebuttal. He was right, and it stung. In a surge of defiance, I grabbed my wallet and stormed over to the main office. It was decided: I was now going to pay almost \$100 dollars to possibly jump to my death. To this day, I still cannot recapture the state of mind that came over me. How useful it would be to know the specific triggers to push yourself beyond what you thought you were capable of. I want to believe I did it for James Bond, but my best guess is that the obvious answer might be true: peer pressure; I was desperate to not give the well-endowed Greg any more ammunition with which to belittle me. I'd finally have an answer to the age-old parental admonishment: "So, if your friend told you to jump off a bridge, you'd do it?" "Firstly," I'd say, "Greg's not my friend... but *dammit*, he has a way with words."

I paid at the till and was subsequently sent to the weighing station. There, my weight was written on the back of my hand in permanent marker as if I was being funneled to the slaughterhouse. I don't know why they recorded the data so crudely, or at all. Surely, you're either under rope's maximum weight limit or

above it. The center of the bridge was two hundred meters from the bottom of the crevasse below, but from the earlier lookout point it seemed like people only really fell about a third of that distance. A suspiciously ample margin for error, I thought, which left a lot of room for experimentation. Perhaps, under the guise of offering us the excitement of a near-death experience, the rubber conglomerates (that morning we'd dealt with Big Shark, now it was Big Rubber) were using us to harvest data, our weights compared to the distance we stretched the cord to measure their product's tensile strength. By signing my bodily rights over to this company, didn't that make me complicit in the horrors wrought by industrial deforestation? How many Bornean orangutans had been slaughtered to harvest the rubber from which we now dangled? Alas, the opportunity to voice ethical qualms had passed; the waiver had been signed and my cash had been taken.

A guide marched our group of 15 or so from the main building out towards the bridge, which was supported by a massive cement archway rooted lower down in the valley. We would be jumping from the top of this arch, which peaked about ten meters below the underside of the road, meaning we'd need to walk out along a narrow walkway hanging from beneath the highway. If I thought my close contact with chicken-wire was over for the day, I was mistaken. Instead of using a solid surface, they had constructed the tunnel using paltry aluminum fencing even flimsier than the shark cage's. I suppose they thought anyone who'd committed to the jump would be unperturbed, but they had erred in my case - it was absolutely terrifying. "Don't look down!" kept being passed back down the line from up ahead, but it was far too late. After what felt like several hours, the unconvincing walkway reached the concrete arch which, finally, had risen to converge with us. We were at least now on solid (if sloping) ground.

Upbeat Afropop music was blasting, cranked up just loud enough to drown out any second thoughts, and it was clear the bungee operators had also been trained to raise the spirits of terri-

fied tourists, keeping us distracted with casual conversation and geeing us up before helping us leap to our (possible) deaths.

Our names were called in slow succession, and I watched person after person pluck up their courage before making their way towards the edge. There, an assistant would strap your feet together and connect the rubber cable, which was about the thickness of a hangman's rope. I had noticed chunks of it (the cord, that is) earlier, in a basket by the checkout counter back at the main building; it had been cut into segments a few inches long and, for a few dollars, you could take one home as a souvenir. Though from a distance the cable had seemed to be one solid length, closer inspection revealed that it was comprised of hundreds of thin rubber filaments bound together. The cashier told me that every segment for sale had been used for the bungee; decommissioned ropes were sliced up and sold to visitors - I was assured these retirements were routine, and merely preemptive, rather than dishonorable discharges.

Eventually my name was called, and I hobbled over. The harness had cut the blood supply to my legs, but I was too scared to care. The crew talked to me as they strapped my feet together. I was entirely focused on maintaining bowel control, but I picked up bits and pieces.

"Remember, please try to dive, because it's very dangerous to fall feet-first. You can get whiplash." Everyone I'd watched earlier, even those who'd followed this advice, had been flung around regardless, but I promised to comply nevertheless. They continued.

"And we can't push you, by the way. People ask all the time, but we aren't allowed. You'll have to do this yourself."

Though I'm sure they could see my knees knocking together and my buttocks clenched so tightly in fear that they'd merged to form a singular glute (it was a good thing I'd left my lucky g-string back at home - it would have been absorbed), the crew graciously pretended that there looked like a chance I intended to get creative:

“Oh, and you can’t get a running start either.”

They probably tell everyone the same thing, but I was still flattered.

“Oh, no! What next? You’re going to tell me I can’t do the back flip I’d planned?”

Was what I wanted to say, turning back around to the rest of the group who would, obviously, be howling with laughter. But I could barely think, let alone speak. Once the crew had me totally prepared, they encouraged me, repeatedly, to move closer to the edge. But I didn’t know where their stupid edge was, nor did I want to find out. My gaze, as it had been since we got off the walkway, was locked on the horizon.

The old adage of “Look Before You Leap!” was out of the question. Dropping my gaze by even a few degrees would, I knew, lead to certain surrender. I relished those few remaining inches of concrete; as far as I was concerned, they represented all the time I had left. To delay the inevitable, I shuffled forward in microscopic increments. Eventually, though, their requests ceased. What a horrible feeling it was, to scrunch your toes and feel nothing beneath them. I’d felt this sensation before, of course, on countless diving boards, for example, but there’s something different when you know just how much nothing there is - it’s like how swimming becomes unnerving and more tiring when you’re way out of your depth. The countdown came from somewhere behind me.

“Three... two... one... Jump!” I launched myself headfirst off the edge.

“I DID IT! I REALLY DID IT!” I screamed at the top of my lungs as I fell. But I was nowhere near the finish line, nowhere near the privilege of speaking about the experience in the past tense. Clearly, I’d played too much James Bond; I’d never visualized anything other than a controlled descent where you just found yourself peacefully waiting at the bottom. The first plummet was over quite quickly, but I hadn’t prepared for the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth. The cable pulled us almost

back to (what felt like) the height of the bridge, then slightly lower each subsequent time, so you end up falling several times the initial distance when it's all over. From the video footage they showed us later on at the headquarters, I was pleased to see I'd executed an almost perfect dive. But what proved even more valuable was that, despite my terror, I'd released no cloud of aerosolized feces on the way down, as I'd have been repeatedly dragged through it like a floating spray-tan booth. Indeed, although I'd seen this happen to the other jumpers from the viewing platform, I hadn't properly internalized that the post-jump phase would be a trial in its own right. I was far too focused on their being rag-dolled; that was least of it. By the third stomach-emptying freefall, the novelty had well and truly worn off. As I dropped back down each time, the image of the rocks rushing up at me from below (an image stayed with me for weeks) was haunting. And this was even *with* my safety (supposedly) guaranteed - how awful, then, must it be as one's last.

Once the bouncing stopped, I was left hanging upside-down like a slaughtered deer with meat hooks through its ankles, a phase of the procedure they hadn't discussed with us and which was horrible in its own right, as every ounce of blood has rushed down into your head, and the intense adrenaline has you hysterical. After a few minutes, two of the nimbler crewmen (Wait a second... they had helmets! Why hadn't *I* been given a helmet!?) rappel down to hog-tie your hands up to your feet. This, mercifully, allows the blood to drain back to your body. Now, though, you must wait another eternity while the team above winch the three of you back up to the bridge. We make it, eventually, but *before* swinging me back over the cement of the jump area, the crew began fiddling with my harness and the surrounding wires. Suspended there, I was now much higher than I would have been had the rope snapped at full extension. Not that I'd be less dead in the former scenario, I guess, but it would at least have meant less time in freefall. What's more, I'd now be falling *after* the rest of the group had already congratulated me. How humiliating.

After what felt like another eternity (a feeling which was becoming all too familiar) the crew swung me back over the cement, and I could finally exhale. Mostly. There remained the small matter of shuffling along the vertiginous walkway to get back to solid land. Acute exposure to one's phobias was supposed to reduce them, but this didn't seem to be true; the return journey was no less awful than the first.

Back on land, we stumbled to the car, utterly exhausted. I noticed my left eye was bloodshot and twitching - I had clenched my face so hard on the way down it felt like I'd ruptured some part of my optic nerve. I hadn't, of course. Given what we'd put ourselves through, this was a small price to pay. I recovered in a few days, although I still get an occasional twitch in that eyelid when I'm overly tired. A worthwhile trade, I think, for having been taught - if by force - the value of confronting one's mortality, an inevitability we deny, or fail to perceive as anything more than a vague abstraction.



Next up was a safari drive. We left our hostel near the bungee bridge at dawn to make it to the game reserve before noon. We made good time and arrived early enough to get some lunch and take in our surroundings. From the welcome building's large deck, we looked out to the reserve. In the foreground, a herd of gazelles grazed over a steppe which spanned a few acres, stretching back for about a mile before sloping steeply upwards and joining a series of rocky hills. Looking back at us from the hillside was the owner's mansion, which had a full-size helipad in the middle of a manicured front garden.

Private parks like this one were common; in most cases, a mysterious foreign investor buys up several thousand acres somewhere remote, then imports as many herds of animals as he can fit in the space. There's usually a spa and other luxury provisions; their websites encourage you to enjoy a glass of wine while sitting

in your jacuzzi or on your suite's deck, where you are perched just feet above a tableau of the African wild: a watering hole where buffalo and zebra peacefully congregate to bathe and drink or, perhaps, a clearing of dried grass where the local warthogs like to mate. *Why couldn't adventure not also be recuperative?* these parks argued. I must have taken this marketing effort on board: as we waited on the outdoor deck for the tour to commence, I drifted to sleep with a family of antelope watching on. For a moment upon waking, I was worried we'd erred in front-loading the trip - given our adrenal glands had now been beaten to an unrecognizable pulp, any further items on our itinerary would need to go some distance to provide sufficient stimulation.

We were told that the higher-profile animals on the property, rather than having been bred for captivity, were either rescued or being rehabilitated in some way. Drifting in and out of sleep on a large couch in front of the main lodge's cozy fireplace, this sounds charming, but idealism erodes gradually as you load up into the open-sided vehicle and trundle off into the wilderness. (Perhaps I was still on edge after my experience in water the day before, but still. Had I gotten my hand ripped off, I'm not sure it would have made me feel much better to know the shark was a rescue - "He's never done anything like this!")

We eased our way in, stopping just a hundred meters or so from the main lodge. The tour guide brought our attention to a nearby herd of springboks, the small antelopes which are the national animal of South Africa. He told us about pronking, their bizarre but endearing straight-legged leaping, bouncing up to four meters into the air. Other species of gazelle, deer, sheep, and goats jump like this too, but the Springboks have made it something of a trademark, though the exact reason for the behavior is unknown. Pronk comes from the Afrikaans *to prance*, as it appears the animals often do it for no reason other than to show off. This could have some basis in reality; strange behaviors like this are often used to ward off lurking predators by demonstrating that the prey has athleticism and agility to burn and will thus be

difficult to catch. For what it's worth, our tour guide, before moving us on, reassured us that their teeth were flat, and used solely to grind down their strictly herbivorous diet of shrubs and grasses. It sounded, to this layman, that these docile, harmless creatures were ideal subjects to meet the park's quota for rehabilitated creatures. We then made our way a few hundred meters over the grassland before rolling to a stop near a rhinoceros, which lay resting in the dust under the dappled shade of a small tree.

"He's one of the only males of his species in the region. He's new, so he's not too friendly with the others yet."

"You have more rhinos in the park?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Oh, wow! Do you think we'll see them? How many are there?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that."

I was thrown by this apparent frostiness; he'd been so genial just seconds before. But he soon explained: poachers had been known to infiltrate safari drives such as ours, using the comprehensive tours as reconnaissance missions to prepare for illegal trespass and hunting, surveying the land and mining data from their unwitting guides. He then returned his attention to the animal.

"They get killed just for their horns. So, we either dye the keratin of the horns pink, or even just saw the whole thing off. Don't worry, it's painless," he added, seeing our shock, "and it's for their own safety. It makes them worthless to the poachers, so they don't have any incentive to touch the animal."

Sure enough, there was only a flat, sanded stump where its horn had been, but the animal was rendered no less dignified by this absence. The guide continued, "They're very strong. This fellow could easily flip us over if he charged us."

This was easy to believe. The disproportionate bulk of the rhino's head was striking; it was the size and shape of a small refrigerator and when powered by his large, stocky frame, would clearly have made for an effective wrecking ball.

This was the first time I'd seen a rhino in person, and I was

fascinated by this beautiful, yet difficult to take seriously, creature. Its skin, although clearly thick and tough, still bunched up endearingly in rolls around his joints and folded over itself at points along his back and torso. In the wild, such excess puppy fat is incongruous for a creature who's survived to adulthood and is now scraping for its survival each day, subsisting on dry vegetation. How has this herbivore managed to acquire so much collagen? How can skin that appears to be made of concrete also look so adorably malleable? From a few feet away, I was reminded of the ridiculous bundles of skin hanging off a Basset Hound (but even those can be explained by centuries of artificial selection).

As a child, I'd been given Rudyard Kipling's collection of *Just So Stories*, which playfully explained how certain species had developed their idiosyncratic traits: an elephant's nose was bitten by a crocodile and stretched into a trunk, for example, while the leopard's spots originated as painted-on camouflage. Kipling also explains what happened to rhinos. Long ago, a mischievous little one stole a man's cake. It was a baking hot day, so, after he had finished his snack, the rhino took a swim in the refreshing water nearby. But before he got in, he took off his skin, which was uncomfortably stiff and far too snug for the heat. In retaliation for the animal's thievery, the man snuck over and sprinkled dry, scratchy breadcrumbs in the rhino's hide while the animal swam unaware. When the animal later got dressed, the crumbs agitated him terribly. He squirmed and rolled on the ground and rubbed against trees and rocks, pulling and stretching his thick hide, accidentally creating its trademark folds and creases in the process. As much as I wanted to believe Darwin, I felt this alternative theory had merit. I didn't offer this to the guide, however, who went on, "We're currently trying to find a mate for him. But, as I said, he's not feeling too social. His family was poached last year."

The rhino regarded us with his sleepy, doleful eyes. I hoped he didn't feel as lonely and heartbroken as I did for his sake. I'd become self-conscious of our intrusion and wished we would move on to leave him in peace. I couldn't fathom the untapped

anger he must have had. I didn't know how strong his vision was, but it was conceivable he might mistake us as his family's poachers. I estimated he would have no problem reaching us if he had a mind to dismember the bearded man in the front row who had, say, picked the wrong day to bear a passing resemblance to whoever killed the animal's mate. But there was no sign the driver shared my concerns; he'd cut the engine and was continuing to rattle off fun facts while smiling cheerfully.

I couldn't help but be reductive: as honorable as it was for us to celebrate and foster the rehabilitation of these magnificent animals, the bottom line was that we sat in an open-sided aluminum cart being stared down by a lonely, frustrated rhinoceros with incredible musculature. If he had anything about him, he'd already be eyeing us up, shrewdly calculating which of us was the weakest link. This realization inspired me to run some actuarial numbers myself. For my money, the rhino's best bet was the thin-lipped man in the row ahead. Though he appeared to be in decent health, he had inexplicably chosen to wear rubber flip-flops. There was no chance I he'd be able to outrun the animal.

Today, though, the granny would survive, and Flip-Flop man wouldn't be held accountable for his choice of footwear: the rhino meandered away, finding a new shrub to munch, and we moved on.



We pushed deeper into the (roughly 16 square mile) park, the majority of which was comprised of steep foothills covered with shrubs and wildflowers. We came to a sudden halt at the base of one of the steep gullies between these hills, where there ran a snaking, shallow brook. Ten meters or so from the right side of the vehicle (a distance that could definitely have been covered by the animal in less time than it took to get the car in gear), we could see three lionesses resting beneath a low acacia tree near the bank. The two younger ones scattered as we arrived, trotting up over the

hill and out of sight. This was their mother, the guide told us. She picked her head up briefly to examine us, but soon lost interest. Her thick tail swatted halfheartedly at the handful of flies pestering her. The guide explained her despondence.

“She’s desperate to mate, so she’s a little bit grumpy at the moment.”

“Amen!” said Greg next to me, drawing a few chuckles from the group.

But this wasn’t the time for jokes. Before us was yet another crabby predator whose ravenous appetite was unsated: I couldn’t relax, I was surrounded.

On cue, a male lion appeared from over the hill over which the two daughters had wandered. He surveyed the contents of the valley as he posed on the ridgeline, silhouetted against the sky. Everyone in the vehicle scrambled over to get a glance at him, fearing he might retreat, but he clearly relished the attention and began descending towards us with a swagger. He hopped over the stream before bee-lining over to the staid female; he must have heard us discussing her frustration. Though she’d ignored his sauntering descent and, even now, still made no effort to greet him, he’d evidently decided he was the man for the job. Without so much as eye contact - let alone a kiss hello - he mounted her. Our guide informed us that these two would be at it several dozen times over the next couple of days while she was in heat - no wonder they seemed sick of each other.

The safari truck then shuddered briefly to life, snapping us out of our voyeurism. The guide had taken his seat without our noticing and had tried, unsuccessfully, to start the motor. He addressed us without turning around.

“We’re just running a little bit behind schedule. I didn’t realize the time, but we don’t want to be stuck this far away from the reserve’s headquarters after dark.”

We’d been so enraptured by the lions that we hadn’t noticed the sun drop below the ridge of the hills to our right, leaving most of our valley in darkening shadow. Someone then pointed up to

the top of the hill. A larger pride of lions had appeared and were now looking down at us. The guide stared up at them while hurriedly trying the motor again, but it stalled for a second time.

“During the day, their vision isn’t great. They see the vehicle as one large animal, so they would never think of being aggressive towards it. But at *night*, their vision is ten times better than ours, so they’re able to identify each of us sitting in the truck and realize that we aren’t a threat, we’re just a herd of prey that has trespassed into their turf.”

The lions had slowly begun to approach. Oh no. It then dawned on me that the male’s mindless humping, which had seemed so pathetic, was actually intentional on his part, and far more sinister. He had a flair for the dramatic and was *taunting* us, foreshadowing what was to come if we were stranded out in his territory. It was the equivalent of making eye contact with someone across the prison yard and seeing them draw their thumb across their neck. Thankfully, before the lions’ vision received its full nocturnal upgrade, the vehicle rumbled to life. The guide reversed us slowly, never taking his eyes off the predators.

It felt, as it had in the shark cage, like we were on another ill-advised scouting mission to ascertain whether natural selection was still functioning properly. We’ve made life so sterile and comfortable that it’s become unsatisfying, so we contrive scenarios to give the primal parts of our brains the stimuli it was engineered to deal with. We’re like a runner who, by an accident of nature, is born to be so much faster than his competition that he’s now lapped the field several times. With the race already well in hand, he teases the others by dropping back slightly to run just out of their reach. Even if he is briefly overtaken, he knows he’ll still win, one way or another.

Despite often putting ourselves in vulnerable positions and tempting fate, we are spiteful, sore losers - the lion (or whatever creature) will be swiftly executed if it dares, forced by its genetic programming, to take the bait. This condescending pantomime of

contrived parity does occasionally make for some memorable incidents. You hear about the tourist who gets out of their car in the safari park to try to pet an elephant (or worse, take a selfie with one - what kind of idiot turns their back on a dangerous animal?) which then decides to impale him with its tusk or flip the car with its trunk. The most notable examples are the trophy hunters who botch the job or are caught on the back foot, getting trampled or mauled by prey that decides to retaliate. But even these are bitter-sweet from nature's point of view, as the creatures rarely win the first encounter. By the time the animal ensures it's the last time the man will hunt, it's too late: most of its friends and family have been slaughtered. One man, whose remains were found inside a group of crocodiles, had run a successful trophy hunting safari service for years. Another poacher, who rangers caught and killed in the act, had documented and bragged about thousands of various kills.



8

MIGHT MAKES RIGHT

Animals aren't the only collateral damage from our unquenchable thirst for control, of course. We are - and have always been - far more sadistic than required in the human versus human field, finding incomprehensibly evil ways to genocide, torture, and otherwise seize space, resources and labor from each other. In modern history, this thirst manifested at scale as colonialism and imperialism, especially once these were fueled by industrialization. South Africa makes for only one example, but its recency makes it one of the more notable cases in the last century or so.

Apartheid was allowed to fester long into the information age due to a confluence of factors: the country's geographic isolation made outside intervention costly and difficult. Moreover, in relation to other concurrent conflicts and struggles on the continent, South Africa presented a façade of structural stability: its economy was thriving (as most would if powered by three quarters of a population providing free labor for the remainder), and it had a white government, which was palatable for the traditional powers. For the Western world, where the Cold War was a far more pressing concern, Soviet endorsement of the anti-apartheid front provided an easy excuse to uphold the status quo, as any dissenting opinions could be labeled untrustworthy and therefore

dismissed. In fact, it was the CIA themselves who gave up the location of a young, disruptive Mandela to the apartheid government. Until the issue's notoriety reached critical mass and it became politically beneficial to do so, it wasn't really in the interest of any world power to intervene. Even then, attempts were mostly flaccid.

In the years after the regime, the international community drew a line under the issue, as if the concepts of freedom and democracy had been sufficiently instated and the country could be left to dust itself off and forge onward as a modern, self-sufficient society. After all, Mandela's inspirational ascent signified a healed nation whose amended constitution was now one of the most progressive in the world. Nevertheless, it remained clear that much of the country's past was alive in its present.

Though the constitution may have received an overhaul, the reality was that superficial claims of recovery were undermined by a bleak reality: a divided, dysfunctional landscape, where any progress was undermined by lazy or malignant actors and institutions.

Of course, South Africa had not undergone any revolution, materially or even ideologically. In the end, apartheid was brought to its knees by economic sanctions, which made it unsustainable. The ANC and Mandela didn't single-handedly overthrow the minority government. The machinations were far more politically and morally complex. Not that anyone cared; we had our fairytale ending.

On my first weekend in the city, we joined a walking tour of the city's historically significant sites. One stop was at a chunk of concrete erected at the entrance of a wide, pedestrianized street. There was some spray-paint, though not enough to identify it as a modern art installation. Rusted ends of thick steel rebar stuck out of the slab's rough edges. It was ugly and bleak, and not at all in keeping with the verdant, relaxed aesthetic of the pedestrianized street it obstructed; it looked to me like someone had smuggled concrete debris from Chernobyl. Though not as thrilling as the

thought of a giant slab of radioactive concrete, the artifact still had historic significance: our guide explained that it was a piece of the Berlin wall which had been presented as a gift to Cape Town by the German city soon after the fall of apartheid in the mid-1990s. Germany, having unified their own country a few years before, now commended South Africa (ostensibly) following suit. By the time our tour group stumbled upon this chunk, its wall had been toppled for a quarter of a century.

South Africa may have received their commemorative wall-chunk of peace and prosperity and officially joined the free market, but conclusive evidence was scant as to whether the past two and a half decades had seen the country undergo meaningful upward change. In Cape Town, large portions of the city and its outskirts, which were zoned specifically for the implementation of draconian policies, look no different today and thus remain open, festering sores. One of the most notable examples of this (eviction en masse, the exertion of control for control's sake) is District Six, a neighborhood we'd been shown at the beginning of that same walking tour. What had been a thriving, multicultural neighborhood in downtown Cape Town in the early 20th century was determined by the government to be a waste of valuable real estate. It was re-zoned as land for whites only, meaning thousands of locals were forcibly evicted. It was decided that it would be more efficient to bulldoze their homes and start anew rather than attempt to renovate each property. The land was razed, with their occupants left homeless or forced into nearby townships. When the time came to fund construction on the cleared land, however, the plan went floppy. Today, recovery has begun, but there remains a scattering of grass lots, parking garages, and a few derelict buildings occupying prime position in the city bowl.



There were a few wide-scale protests that garnered media attention during my visit, during which the local highways were

closed off by police or blockaded by piles of burning tires and groups of marchers. The government-issued euphemism for these disputes was “Service Delivery Protests.” By “services,” it turned out, they referred to basic human rights like water and healthcare, making the citizens’ anger, in the volunteers’ view, totally understandable. Our sympathy notwithstanding, we were mostly insulated from these protests; Muizenberg, whose inhabitants were mostly white and middle class, was not deprived of the aforementioned services like the nearby townships were.

Unfortunately, with most of my time spent between the children and the other travelers, I didn’t have the chance to canvas many locals of voting age. The adults who *were* in my orbit had no time to spare, having far more pressing issues on their plates: Charles, for example, enacting martial law on juvenile miscreants, Pastor Busby trying to stick to his rigorous siesta regime, and Valentino, the Shaggy impersonator, occupied with deflowering as many groupies as possible.

Even so, I did my best to query where possible. Not embedded journalism by any stretch, but I liked putting my finger on the pulse once in a while. This proved easiest in taxis, whose drivers - almost exclusively black - were usually politically informed, and always receptive to an informal interview. They were so talkative, in fact, that it was me who was seen as a wet blanket. For the first several rides, I acted as I would have back in the US: the driver pulls up, asks your name, and that’s the last of the conversation until you thank him as you leave the vehicle at your destination. This code of silence was customary, and, often, mutually beneficial: many drivers seemed happy to sing along to their music or take phone calls with friends or family. Here in Cape Town, though, I noticed that I was accruing substandard reviews. But *for why?* we ask. I hadn’t drunkenly vomited on any of these trips, nor had I canceled or stood any of these drivers up. I then tried dialing up the geniality, starting these rides off with some chit-chat before lobbing out a few softball questions to get them going on current affairs or sport. Like the sword from the

stone, my friends. The floodgates opened, and I was inundated with life stories, anecdotes, and political commentary.

The sentiments of my friend from the flight into the country were pervasive; I sensed little optimism regarding the government, albeit a staunch loyalty. By the sounds of it, many of the continued votes for the ruling party were less in hope for progress and more a tithe of appreciation towards the memory of Mandela and his efforts. The prevailing rationale for all this was that society was “dog eat dog;” one had no choice but to get on side.

“Yes, they’re all corrupt,” one driver said, “But so is the rest of the world. It’s every man for himself.” I remarked that he didn’t sound too troubled by all this. And he had a point, of course. Every man for himself was America’s ideological lynchpin, too. Even so, the instances of malfeasance being so blatant here must have been frustrating. I noted that one of the ANC’s leaders had been arrested earlier that week after having been caught embezzling millions of taxpayer dollars over the last decade.

“I’m just happy a few of us can be rich,” he said, “Our people were nothing for so many years. And now we’re in power, living in big houses, driving nice cars.”

“We” sure seemed like it was doing a lot of heavy lifting there, I thought - but his feelings were by no means unique. For much of the black population, years of dehumanization and their world being reduced to a binary, life and death struggle had extinguished any trust they had in institutions. If given a choice, many would prefer a bad black person in power to any white person, if only because this signified a power shift, however marginal, away from the white hegemony.



As far as *white* locals, it appeared that they, like us volunteers, were also insulated from the struggles faced by so much of the population. Less than 1% of the country’s white population lived in townships; the wealth gap was such that even the poorest quarter

of the white population was still markedly more comfortable and secure than their black counterparts. The middle class and above could remain, if they so desired, almost entirely oblivious. Even the scheduled power cuts were avoidable for people that could afford their own private generators. I didn't get the chance to collect much data on this, however. The only white taxi driver I'd met was Lollipop.

I squandered the best opportunity I got, and in memorable fashion, too. I'd realized that I, like the girl from the Lollipop drive, was also in need of a haircut. My friend and I did a brief search to find the cheapest place nearby that seemed legitimate and not candy-themed; I wasn't interested in needing to steel myself for a visit to, say, "Mr. Licorice's Grooming and Waxing Warehouse." After finding a barber with a real website (and, crucially, what seemed to be its own, independent storefront), we called over and made an appointment for the next afternoon.

The next day, our pickup from school was late, forcing my friend to cancel. Greg and I had bought a secondhand bike from the local pawnshop, so I still had a chance to make my appointment, but what might have been a leisurely walk across town along the beachfront on this particularly warm day now had to be a frantic velodrome sprint along the main road. I arrived just in time and sat, flustered but relieved, beneath the thick, stifling plastic cape the barber had flung around my neck with vigorous panache.

As my heart thumped relentlessly, I started to notice the room's stuffiness. The ride had been so anaerobically intense that my body hadn't got the chance to react. But now it did. Sitting before the mirror, I had the rare opportunity to watch myself suffocate. My neck was being completely constricted by the stiff strip of Velcro. I tried straining my neck muscles to loosen the strap's chokehold, but it was too secure - I risked a hernia if I pushed harder. Folds of skin, given nowhere else to go, now hung, bulging, over the collar, giving me a sort of turkey's wattle. I sat there, panting and spluttering to the barber how I'd like to "keep a

bit of length on top, if that was alright,” hoping the wave of discomfort would pass. Alas, the greenhouse effect created under the tarp must have triggered my sympathetic nervous system’s emergency protocol; my body activated sweat glands that hadn’t ever been called into action before (and haven’t been since). My scalp was apparently assigned to manage the bulk of the heat release. With my trapped hands incapable of dabbing them, the beads of sweat that had begun to appear when I entered the building had given way to rivulets which pissed down my beet-red face. My vision started to blur and constrict; I couldn’t last another second.

“Excuse... Sorry... Sorry - I desperately need the bathroom.” I sprang up, ripping off the collar as I muttering a string of apologies. The black vinyl of the seat was drenched with sweaty condensation. I sprinted to the sink and ran my head under a cold tap for a couple of minutes. Keeping my head beneath the faucet, I reached for the paper towel dispenser, fumbling with it blindly before realizing it was empty. I squeezed as much of the water out of my hair as I could before slinking sheepishly back to the shop floor.

Both barbers were visibly unimpressed, and I couldn’t blame them: from their perspective, I’d propositioned them under false pretenses. No coherent narrative could explain my urgency nor my copious sweat. Perhaps I suffered from a combination of hot flashes and unpredictable diarrhea, but even this failed to account for why I’d chosen to carpet bomb *their* commode in particular. We were nowhere near the beach and I’d already told them I’d biked across town to get here.

Alas, because I looked so *very* guilty, I faced the same dilemma as the Lollipop man: offering *any* overly-specific explanation would only be more incriminating. I had no choice but to let them speculate. So I stayed silent as I sat there awkwardly, my mousy hair matted down my forehead like a sodden, red-faced Hitler-sans-mustache. I decided to pay double the fee to recompense for my peculiar behavior, but when I stood up I realized the

bills I'd brought must have fallen out of my pocket in the chaos of the bike ride. I promised I'd be back later on to pay.

"Yeah, whatever. Please, just get out of here."

I knew I had no choice but to like the cut, as I definitely wasn't going to risk getting another one before I left. Thankfully, he'd given me far better than the butcher's job I deserved.



After the barbershop debacle, I resolved to build up my fitness, which had evidently lapsed since my arrival in the country; I'd paid dearly for my lack of discipline. Thankfully, I'd packed my tennis rackets, having hoped to play while abroad. After some research, I found the nearest club and learned that they had courts reserved for non-members to use in the afternoon on Tuesdays and Thursdays. One Tuesday, school was canceled due to a particularly disorderly service delivery protest that had totally blocked the access roads. But this was closer to the city; heading south was fair game. I called the tennis club, who said they'd be open as usual. The courts were a few miles away, too far to walk. I certainly wasn't going to call the Lollipop cab, so I decided to take my chances on the train. On the way there, it was rush hour, so the train was crammed. I felt terribly conspicuous: there was nobody else with a tennis racket and *certainly* no other white volunteers.

I watched as two teenage boys forced open one of the carriage doors, taking turns hanging outside as the train whizzed along. The woman next to me turned to her friend.

"They must stop doing that. Last week, a boy fell out."

I can't blame the kids for getting a better view; it was spectacular. On our right, the slopes of the Cape's mountains rose so steeply that their peaks were invisible from inside the train. These slopes descended almost straight into the water, interrupted only by the thin strip of paved land at the base along which our tracks ran, close enough to sea level that spray from the crashing waves

speckled the windows. The town we were headed for, Fish Hoek (roughly translated to fisher's corner), was a few miles south, set into a cove along the eastern side of the peninsula. The town and its pristine beach panned out on our left as the tracks turned, hugging the inward curve of the coastline.

The courts were set back from the ocean in a valley just over some low hills. When I arrived, the manager told me we'd have to wait in the clubhouse for a little while. "Sorry, we can't play right now. Forest fire. Don't worry, this happens every so often. We've called the fire department - they're sending a helicopter to make sure it doesn't get too close. We can play once they arrive - you'll fill in for Ted."

I noticed the smoke, which had partially obscured an undulating line of glowing orange crawling slowly down the slope, was leaving blackened earth behind it; the wind had carried the blaze from further down the peninsula. The fire brigade soon arrived to slow the advance of the flames and seemingly get things under control. The members emerged from the clubhouse, divided into small groups, and scattered to the different courts before starting to warm up. I was the youngest there by a couple of decades; most of the other players were sweater-vested retirees. The fire was a minor inconvenience; this was a Tuesday, and they play tennis on Tuesdays, the way it had always been. Do whatever you want, but don't bother us on Tennis Tuesdays. If you *must* burn, burn in a different direction, for God's sake. But South Africa keeps getting drier, and the fires spread more easily each year, each time encroaching further into the periphery of Tennis Tuesday. Perhaps one day soon something would have to give. Not today, though. Today we could disregard the disturbance and carry on with our round robin. Because the non-member session started in the late afternoon, it finished around sunset, meaning I had to take the train and walk back across town in the dark. As such, I only braved the journey once more. The next week, the train got held up on the way back because someone had fallen onto the tracks and died. I didn't see the body, but that was enough for me

- tennis could wait until I was back in the US. Unfortunately, this meant I didn't get to know any of the other players. Luckily, the candid assessments I heard regarding the country's state of affairs from other suburbanites around town were more than enlightening enough.



There were a few tennis tournaments televised during my time there, and one of the only places they were screened within walking distance was a pub in the semi-gated neighborhood down the road based around a man-made marina set back a mile or so from the beach. Houses surrounded the edges of the main reservoir and lined the banks of the winding canals jutting outwards. Fortunately, the bridge guard deemed my racial profile acceptable. So too did the private neighborhood's residents, who evidently concluded that I ought to be considered an *ex-pat* rather than an *immigrant* - though there seems to be little semantic separation between these designations, their connotations are vastly different. As I crossed the little wooden bridge on my visits, I'd nod at the man in the security booth, who'd return the gesture with a knowing smile. He never stopped or even questioned me, and there seemed an unspoken understanding that I was not a threat. This hospitality did not extend to any of the black pedestrians or delivery drivers who sought to gain entrance, whom the guard (also a black man) was often in the middle of interrogating as I strolled past.

Along with entering and exploring the neighborhood without supervision, my high-level security clearance meant I didn't raise the hackles of the pub's regulars. Though I came for the tennis matches, nothing I saw on-screen was as fascinating as some of the chatter I heard behind me. I listened intently (but made sure to never turn around), ordering a glass of cordial or a little bowl of peanuts every once in a while so as not to arouse the other patrons' suspicion. While certain impassioned talking points on

race science and its adjacent topics were predictable, what was curious was how few of these theories were delivered combatively; instead, they seemed matter-of-fact and thought-out, the way you'd talk about the differences between two car brands. Several times the conversation drifted towards phrenology - I often felt we were just seconds away from someone pulling out a skull and a pair of old calipers.

It sounds hyperbolic but, as we learned on that walking tour, the basis for state-sanctioned discrimination during apartheid was just as troubling and, if possible, even *less* scientific. Given the country's wide range of racial and ethnic demographics, it wasn't always clear to the government where certain civilians ought to be placed on the spectrum of subjugation. Adding to this uncertainty, *colored* was its own distinct group, ranking slightly higher than "black" in terms of rights and social status. For those citizens whose race wasn't immediately apparent, the government came up with the Pencil Test, wherein an official would stick a pencil through the subject's hair and instruct them to shake their head around. If the pencil stayed in, they were adjudged to have had the hair of a black person, and were therefore to be classified as such. Anyone who didn't look white but could still "pass" the Pencil Test was thus deemed colored (or Indian).

Though these tests were no longer carried out, other vestiges of the era remained: we seldom saw non-black service staff, and it was common to hear waiters and other workers being referred to as (or just called) "boy." Further along this spectrum, large chunks of the Afrikaans population were white nationals, forming self-governing segregationist colonies in the heartland whose citizens openly discussed the need to protect the white race from an encroaching black swarm. This was an uncontroversial in these communities, whose fundamental Christian values have been molded to accommodate their socio-ethnic beliefs. Many of these folks have bunkers prepared for an impending doomsday, believing their militia of local farmers will be able to buy enough time to survive until the rapture.

Alas, I never got to meet any of these folks myself. The closest taste I got came the week after our Garden Route trip, when we rented a car to go out to the wine region again and stumbled into our own sort of time capsule. It wasn't near as extreme as those colonies deep in the bush, but certainly an area hospitable to those longing for a bygone era. Tired from several hours of driving, I proposed we stop in for one last breakfast on the road. Up ahead, we noticed a farmhouse set back from the road. "Breakfast All Day Long!" a small billboard advertised. A papier mâché strawberry the size of a golf cart had two eyes and "Fresh Fruit!" painted on it. Scattered along the driveway, in various states of rust and disrepair, was an assortment of farm vehicles and machinery, some of which were attended by life-size mannequins dressed in farming gear. It felt as if we'd stumbled upon one of those carnivals and circuses found in abandoned towns, its rides and stall fronts dilapidated but still standing. Human-sized sculptures of various fruits and vegetables lined the driveway, along with large arrow signs cut from plywood. The bulbs around these arrows illuminated in sequence before flashing a few times in unison and restarting their circuit, directing our attention towards the house, whose parking lot was mostly empty. Perhaps delirious from exhaustion, I wanted to explore; the rest of the group was curious, too. What the hell, we figured, we had a big enough group to defend ourselves. We parked, and a host appeared from inside the building.

"Welcome. If you want to see our farmers' market, it's just to your left. We have lots of different arts and crafts. If you're here for the restaurant, please continue to the rear of the building."

We went through and were led up some stairs to the second floor of the building. The seating area for the restaurant was an outdoor terrace which overlooked the vineyards and fields behind, which eventually rose to become the beautiful mountain range running through the wine-lands. Our hostess handed us our menus.

“Lovely view, isn’t it? You can see where all our fresh fruit comes from!”

We looked down below and panicked when we realized what she meant: watching our fruit get picked was a selling point of the establishment. Between the tilled rows of vegetation below us were bonneted black women, each carrying a woven basket they filled as they worked their way down the length of the field. We looked over at the tables adjacent to us and saw a few small parties, all of them white and South African-sounding. Though there were a few glasses of water amongst them, I noticed none of them had even ordered food. In fact, they had shifted their chairs around their tables in order to get a better view of the workers below. I tried to work out whether any of this was self-aware, perhaps some meta societal critique. Was this some sort of role-play for locals who were pining for the good old days?

Was this some sort of Renaissance Fayre for fans of chattel slavery? Not the craziest theory; it still happened all the time back home in the US, where sororities and fraternities all across the south were known for hosting Antebellum parties. *Ante bellum*: Latin for before the war, i.e. the American Civil. Was this what was going on here, if in a slightly more brazen form?

We paid for our fruit and drove home, bewildered.

9

SCRAMBLING FOR ANSWERS (OR MAYBE JUST EXCUSES)

Our surreal pit-stop forced me to try to figure out what the hell was going on. Was that breakfast not a microcosm of what was happening at scale? If so, didn't that make spending even a penny here unjustifiable? We were directly contributing to a system where this type of thing was allowed to happen. Or was the notion of "contributing to the economy" noble enough in itself to outweigh all else?

Why was nobody talking about this? Were they oblivious? Or in denial?

Maybe there was a biological explanation. Perhaps our woeful paralysis in the face of these issues is explained by our innate aversion to stress and responsibility. The likelihood we'll intervene to help someone in need decreases quantifiably as the vulnerable group in question increases in size, which explains why those UNICEF commercials linger so excruciatingly on just the lone malnourished child staring longingly into the camera - this elicits more sympathy from us than if a dozen children are in the frame. This is primal: because we're conditioned to protect our scarce resources and can't jeopardize the survival of our own kin, we find it easier to distance ourselves from what we can reason to be a

separate clan (which, we reason, ought to fend for itself). In fact, we become less likely to act if even a *second* person appears - be it another victim or a witness like us: as either group grows we feel less obligated to intervene, as we presume the chance that someone else will step in grows, too. As a bonus, in the event of inaction and tragedy, guilt is therefore partitioned and, in turn, diluted.

Pragmatic indifference seems an unavoidable by-product of a Western culture whose economic system explicitly encourages ruthless self-interest and whose unrelenting news cycle of mass shootings, refugee crises, and foreign wars makes a certain desensitization unavoidable; compassion simply cannot increase commensurately with the number of worthy causes.

As we struggle to fathom the world's distressing complexities, these tools allow us to continually zero our moral scales. But what results in South Africa is a troubling, real-time case study wherein these rationalizations are severely tested: the extent of the suffering, whether material or psychological, is impossible to fully comprehend or empathize with, the demographics involved more than large enough for a newcomer to hide behind the inertia of the status quo.

Anyway, you're right: my citing these mitigating factors after the fact as an implied defense for my complicity *is* self-serving junk (and, for that matter, offered so tactlessly as to be almost patronizing). None of it holds much water. As if either of us *really* believe that simply feeling (or just voicing) our concern and pity makes our inaction less shameful. It's just that, as I relay them, experiences and concerns which I knew to be superficial and self-absorbed even at the time now feel more so on reflection: a Titanic survivor, being paddled back to land, proceeding to give a detailed, whiny review of the ship's fine dining experience. But to feign a serene obliviousness feels more disingenuous (and less therapeutic), so, for now, the navel-gazing equivocation will continue:

I began to wonder whether the land's unique natural beauty was, at some level, disadvantageous. The country offers countless focal points towards which we might direct our attention and point our cameras - areas unconnected to poverty, disease, and suffering. Harrowing expanses of helplessness and blight are juxtaposed against - and in many cases overshadowed by - colorful, photogenic, (unspoiled) panoramas. Because of the enchanting location, a visitor's well-meaning but misplaced idealism can burnish their interpretation of the area and dull their concerns. It's easy to imagine such a paradise could ease *any* suffering. For observers, feelings of shame can therefore be lessened by distraction, which is more easily justified than conscious evasion; rather than averting our eyes, we can instead *divert* them. Though seemingly pedantic, this slight distinction incurs drastically different (and preferable) moral consequences; with its help, we can more easily suppress the creeping suspicion we are guilty of some undefined - yet undeniable - dereliction of moral duty. And so, the sweeping destitution becomes just another feature to regard and explore - or not.

This jarring dissonance was evident even on my first ride to Muizenberg, along the coastal road which traces the flat length of the northern section of False Bay, the body of water created by the Cape as it pokes west before hooking southwards into the Atlantic. The road thus provides an irresistible panorama as it parallels miles of uninterrupted, south-facing beach, with the mountain ridges of the mainland and cape bookending the cobalt of the ocean on the east and west.

A breeze rearranges the Bay's surface, taking care to agitate no more water than necessary. While the water beneath lolls, subdued, its top coat is transformed into a vast canvas. Millions of reflective sequins avail themselves, and the light commissions each of them: oblong and crescent-shaped swatches shift across the blue of the bay, each migrating for a few seconds before losing momentum and fading away, only to be replaced by another nearby setting off in its own direction. Their forms fluctuate, but

these glittering reflections seem to betray a telepathy - if not a collective consciousness, reminiscent of a flock of birds or school of fish whose configuration en masse is somehow both chaotic and synchronized.

On the other side of the road, the land is covered for miles by the makeshift shelters that typify the country's townships, the most readily-apparent vestige of legalized segregation. Over the decades, huge swaths of the black and colored populations were forcibly removed from the cities and relocated to designated areas of land nearby. Though implemented by apartheid, millions still inhabit these slums, the borders for which failed to expand over time in proportion to the population inside (as did political momentum for the provision of the occupants' social welfare).

Compared to the ripples on the water nearby, the tin roofs covering these homes are far more static targets for the sun, albeit more unique: each panel a different size than the last and at a slightly different slope, rust having corroded them to varying degrees. Some roofs are just tarpaulin or plastic scrap and thus give off no reflection at all, able to do nothing but absorb the sun as it beats down indiscriminately. A hazy mirage hangs a second, distorted horizon above this patchwork sprawl, interrupted only by the telephone poles planted at random intervals. These seem the township's tallest structures by several meters. Between them run bundles of thick power lines and, from their transformers, handfuls of wires hang down, maypole-like, connecting to the surrounding houses. The driver confirms that the electrical grid's arrangement is as inconvenient for the occupants as it looks: during the winter, South Africa's rainy season, these haphazardly configured poles and lines are easily damaged and, given the lack of reliable drainage and sewage, flooding is common and often disastrous, thus repairs are complicated, dangerous, and interminable, leaving infrastructure and homes ruinously neglected for months or years.

The road continues. On the Atlantic side, the dense shrubbery leading right down to the water is replaced by a seemingly

flawless beach. Opposite, a group of boys play football in a dirt clearing, deftly avoiding a cow grazing in the middle of the lot. A stray dog follows two men traipsing down the shoulder of the highway towards the city. A few hundred meters further down the road, several large suburban model homes are under construction. It seems there will be a new gated housing development available within a few months. The roadside billboards advertise space, luxury, and sea views - all just a short drive from the city's business district. As luxurious as these new neighborhoods purport to be, they are often built just meters from local townships, perpetuating the stark demarcation.



As if extricating yourself from moral purgatory wasn't challenging enough, the constant call for vigilance added an uncomfortable layer of complexity. However inconvenient it was, the fact remained that crime was abundant, a reality that we were made aware of early and often by program administrators, locals, and the longer-tenured volunteers, all of whom offered guidance on countless aspects of our day-to-day lives. The guide from our walking tour, for example, who got our attention before setting us loose to explore the city's small plaza.

“Don't explore alone, the area is full of pickpockets. If you *need* to buy something, use the ATM over there. But make *absolutely sure* no strangers are behind you, and that you use it as a group. Oh, and jiggle the card receiver first to make sure someone hasn't put a fake reader on it to steal your card details - that's been happening quite a bit recently. Anyway, we'll meet back here in twenty minutes. Have fun!”

It turned out what I'd really needed from our guide was a caveat emptor:

The plaza, Greenmarket Square, was originally used as a slave market, but was now home to a flea market filled with rows of little stalls where locals peddled their (non-human)

wares. At the first stall I stopped, I fell for a matronly African woman's sob story about her escape from her home country. Fortunately, she claimed, she'd brought some fabrics and supplies with her and had made each of the patterned crafts before me by hand, with the help of her daughters. Happy to put money towards a charitable cause, I bought a tea towel, nobly refraining from haggling down the price. Seconds after my purchase, I walked past three other stands with similar-looking plump women reciting identical stories to other tourists while displaying the exact same handbags, towels, and beaded jewelry. Oh, well.

Anyway; within your first few days, you're reminded to not leave your house after dark, not to carry more than ten dollars-worth of cash on your person, not to use or show your phone in public in case it gets snatched, and to roll your car windows up before reaching a stop sign or red light in case there are carjackers waiting to pounce. Endearingly, traffic lights are called "robots" - even on official road signage - perhaps giving an idea of where the country is in its development. You're instructed to walk in groups as much as possible, and to avoid public transport and taxis altogether. If you leave your wallet or purse on a park bench or at the beach, you're scolded for your naïveté and told it's not even worth your energy to go back to check if it's still there. Looking back, the tone was set even before that first evening's break-in-and-stabbing story, during that first trip from the airport when I asked our driver why nobody was enjoying the immaculate beach on our left.

"Oh, it's far too dangerous to stop here."

I contend there didn't seem to be a human in sight.

"Yes, they hide in the bushes - they'll steal the car no problem."

The empty road, narrowed slightly by the encroaching sand being blown inland from the shore, and the neck-high, impenetrably dense shrubbery running along either side of us now seemed eerie rather than tranquil. I couldn't help but stare

intently at the passing greenery, trying to pick out the carjackers waiting to strike.

It was difficult to summarily dismiss these cautions as fear-mongering, for along with each of these came a personal (or near-enough) anecdote. Everyone who'd lived in the country for more than a few months seemed to have a worryingly extensive catalog of instances where they, their friends, or their associates had been a victim of some type of crime. These incidents were usually petty, but were often more traumatic; it was not uncommon for overwhelmed volunteers to cut their trip short - the young man who was stabbed or the woman who was hijacked, for example - including some who *weren't* direct victims but who were wrung out by the anxiety. The national statistics seemed to corroborate these concerns, and perhaps didn't even reveal their full extent, as many crimes went unreported.



Nevertheless, with so much of the country's past alive in its present, many aspiring do-gooders feel compelled to distance themselves - as conspicuously as possible - from the legacy of apartheid. For as heartrending as the wider situation was, though, it seemed like there were precious few options to offer meaningful support at an individual level.

As far as more earnest options went, one was a boat trip out to Robben Island. Despite appearing to be little more than a sandbar protruding from the Atlantic, this little island a few kilometers off the north coast of the peninsula has quite a sinister history: it was Apartheid South Africa's version of Alcatraz, imprisoning political dissidents for decades - Nelson Mandela was kept there for nearly twenty years. Now a museum and protected heritage site, visitors can travel out to the island via ferry to be shown around by tour guides, most of whom are ex-prisoners.

Given the mysterious, remote nature of the island, it seemed reasonable to me that visitors would now want to explore it. But if

the political prisoners were, hypothetically, still being kept there, this would become a different proposition. This, in my view, made the notion of the Township Tour quite a curious one. Tickets for these were sold by many of the local hostels and tour companies, who were proud to advertise that you would be shown around by a real, live, resident of the township. I wasn't quite sure of the intended purpose of these little expeditions, but my hunch was they were overseen by travel companies with similar ownership models as our own. I'm sure the industry creates a few jobs, and the proceeds from these tours do help certain locals. And, unfortunately, there probably isn't a more legitimate way for a credulous tourist to personally interact and give directly to a resident of these areas. Because of the chasm between class and demographic which still exists, these tours that provide sanctioned, secure access are the only way for visitors to acquire any appreciation of the harrowing realities faced by so many.

Some visitors managed to convince themselves they'd be spared from danger if their intentions were sufficiently pure. This included a girl who arrived a week after me to help at an understaffed orphanage in the heart of a nearby township. Courageous work, by any standard, but she soon concluded this would not be sufficient in her quest to change lives. One night, the program administrators caught her sneaking out to the highway to hail a taxi. It turned out that she'd promised several of the children she would have a sleepover with them at their houses. The girl's intentions were benevolent, I'm sure, and she should perhaps be applauded for committing so devotedly to her role. Sentiment aside, however, there was plenty to be concerned about. After being wrangled back inside and having the legal and moral liability explained to her at length, the administration team asked her to share the thought process behind her decision.

"These kids have changed my life, and I want to get a window into theirs. To be honest, I kind of feel like they're *my own* children."

A real tear-jerker, I know. Unfortunately, for as charming as it would have been, allowing her to pursue her dreams was out of the question; these townships were dangerous for the average resident, let alone a white, red-headed girl from New Hampshire. Crime being conducted based on criteria other than the victim's nuanced altruism is a notion you'd think the volunteers, if nobody else, would have been disabused of upon hearing that one of their own had been stabbed or robbed. You'd have thought that, if our group's intentions counted for *anything*, we and our houses would have been off limits to the local gangs – *hell*, we might have even deserved protection in our dealings around town.

Alas, we were awarded no leniency and were taken, of course, for the easy marks we were. This meant that, for the rest of us, maintaining a constant level of alertness felt like a necessity: if you're notified of a recent spurt of muggings, you avoid the relevant areas where possible, and you certainly don't walk anywhere alone or after dusk. If your neighbor or colleague tells you there's been an uptick in carjackings on certain stretches of the nearby highway, you begin to eye every roadside construction crew with distrust. At every intersection, you check each of your mirrors to see whether anyone approaches the vehicle.

Even parking was nerve-wracking: as soon as you find a spot, you're converged upon by *car guards*, a suspiciously self-justifying phenomenon found any place where drivers tend to park. Public lots or roads near beaches, markets, or shopping centers are hotspots, as is anywhere in the city. Individuals, or small groups, patrol the streets and loiter at street corners within their given territory, waiting for an unsuspecting driver to take an available space before hurrying over to offer protection. There isn't a set price for the service; whatever coins you happen to have in your center console will suffice. In fact, you don't *have to* give them anything. But as the group of scruffy men swarm around you and your car, it's difficult to feel like you have much negotiating power, especially when you notice one of them is holding behind

his back what looks like a crowbar. “You look like you’re going to be in that restaurant for a couple of hours. It would be a real shame if anyone came by and tried to forcibly gain entry into your nice new car. It looks like you might have some important personal belongings in the back seat. The rear window already has a crack in it - somebody could easily break through and open the door from the inside. Anyway, don’t worry about any of that. Leave her with us, she’ll be in good hands. Go enjoy your little food market.”

Given the lack of police presence, there’s often no option but to accept the terms of their proposal, wherein they’ve ingeniously created both the supply *and* the demand. So, with sincere thanks, you offer these kind fellows the equivalent of a dime or a quarter before scurrying off, but not before double- and triple-checking that you’ve locked the doors and rolled up the windows. In order to enjoy the rest of your day, you pin your hopes on the idea that these men operate in good faith, dispelling from your mind the realization that, in this slapdash free market where your property’s protection is auctioned for pennies on the dollar, an enterprising third party could very easily outbid you in your absence. I saw one German tourist preempt this, raising the starting bid by handing a crisp fifty-euro note to a car guard before heading into a grocery store. Even the guard was astonished, as he hadn’t even said a word before the tourist passed him the money and hurried away. I grimaced; just a few clueless tourists like him a year ensured these guards harangued the rest of us mercilessly.

On several occasions, I came back to my rented car to see a man waiting beside it, informing me that, by parking on his turf, I had implicitly agreed to his terms; many car guards advertise washing your vehicle along with protecting it. He’d washed my car, he said - though he clearly hadn’t - and now I owed him. I could see a few of his associates approaching to encircle the car, and so I agreed to pay, but explained that, as my cash was in the glove compartment, I’d need to get in the car first. Once inside, I locked the door, but several of the men tried pulling at the

handles to gain access. One man yanked my windshield wiper up so it would snap back down and shatter the glass, but he lost his grip as I stomped the gas pedal and lurched away. I sped off to safety, wiper erect, thanking God my parents had forced me to learn stick shift; a stalled engine would have been catastrophic.



10

MAN VERSUS WILD

For as much as I dreaded parking in the city, there was somehow a far more intimidating car guard situation in the wild. There are dozens of famous lookout spots along the peninsula and at its tip, the Cape of Good Hope, to which tourists flock. These are accessed by a handful of winding, one and a half lane roads which, despite doing their best to negotiate the length of the thin, mountainous headland, are often forced to stray precariously close to the cliff edges. Where space for shoulders *has* been carved out, only some of the erected warning signs mention the dangerously steep drop below; the rest remind visitors to beware the troops of mischievous baboons. Sure enough, tourists returning to their vehicles after making their way up to a lookout point or down to one of the beaches below are often confronted with the dilemma of a baboon blocking access to the driver's door, or even sitting on top of the car. If there are no national park workers nearby, it's up to you to haggle with your fanged adversary.

In one incident, a man who seemed to have experience in such dealings was lucky enough to have a packet of chips with him and was smart enough to scatter them on the other side of the car for the baboon to chase, giving the man a brief opportunity to safely get inside the vehicle.

On another occasion, I saw a woman stumble upon her ape-adorned Volkswagen wholly unprepared. By the time she understood the rules of engagement, the result had already been decided: she'd been bested. Given the opponent, she'd also realized that, sadly, pleading ignorance would be futile. As he held the car hostage, the victorious primate watched on in smug bemusement as the woman attempted to shoo him off by shouting, clapping her hands, and gesticulating wildly. After a few minutes, she dejectedly tossed her purse into a nearby clearing for him to claim. To her great relief, he happily abandoned the car and bounded after the bag.

A different woman stubbornly insisted on bringing her designer purse into the national park area despite the repeated warnings of the workers. She was unlucky to have picked a day where the animals were feeling particularly ornery; as soon as she passed through the entranceway, a baboon, which had undoubtedly been eyeing her up since she got out of her car, swung down from his tree and yanked the bag out of her hands before scampering back into the branches and hopping gracefully on to the roof of the building. He then sat cockily above the group, their guide watching on helplessly as the woman screamed at him to climb up and reclaim her purse from the animal. Though only about a third the size of humans, these animals are powerful, canny and, apparently, have a penchant for Gucci accessories - she never stood a chance. Her screeching protestations got louder when the monkey bored of dangling the bag by its strap and decided to show off his fine-motor skills and undeniably impressive grasp of human mechanisms. He started by unzipping the main pocket of the bag - not too difficult, but vital nevertheless. He then rummaged around, finding a travel pack of tissues and delicately pulling several of these out one by one, pausing each time to let them flutter down onto the group. He then found a sports drink bottle, confidently pulling up the nozzle to get access to the liquid before tilting his head back and squirting some of the juice into his mouth. Eventually he tired of this

display and, after flipping the bag upside down to dump its remaining contents onto the group, scampered away with it across the roof of the main building before leaping off into the brush.

These were the only times I saw prolonged interactions in person, but the baboons' presence always loomed. No handbags or dustbins were safe - this much was clear - but more grave attacks were exceedingly rare. Sounds like good news, I know. But one of our group outings was such a PR disaster that I was left hoping the apes would, *at the very least*, abduct me.



About ten of us had organized a camping trip to Kommetjie (pron. Com-eck-ee), a secluded national park on the west coast of the peninsula. Things didn't start too badly; we arrived in the afternoon and unpacked our tents, assembling them around the fire pit in the center of our rented campsite. I helped set up and rolled out a few sleeping bags. My early contributions didn't particularly shoot me up the social rankings, but I was happy to ride with the peloton for now, saving my energy for when it would be most impactful. What I didn't know was the metaphorical powder I kept dry would be spent entirely on obliterating my own stock.

With our tents erect, we sat around the fire. Somebody suggested we take turns describing the most beautiful thing we'd seen in Africa so far. We got halfway around, with people giving the names of their favorite mountains or beaches, or perhaps showing a picture of a wildflower they'd found on a hike. Nothing earth-shattering, but certainly all offered in good faith. It was then the turn of Nicolas, a Spaniard who had been openly flirting with a Mexican girl named Paloma since his arrival in South Africa earlier in the week. He had been late to the fire and shifted people out of the way so he could squeeze in next to her.

"To me, the most beautiful thing in Africa is ... Paloma." He

gazed at his target longingly, and reached out to brush a loose strand of her hair behind her ear.

“Aww! Oh my God, he’s so romantic,” said the American girls to my left, “this is like a movie.” Our Iberian Shakespeare was spurred on by the reception he was getting; his newfound confidence prompted him to test the waters by resting his hand on the Mexican girl’s thigh. Pleased with himself, he started looking around the circle, trying to catch everyone’s eye and give them a wink or an unctuous smirk. When he noticed a few people on the far side of the circle had been deep in their own conversation, he called over to get their attention.

“Guys, did you hear me? I said, ‘the most beautiful thing in Africa is Paloma!’”

The American girls, the same ones who had heard him perfectly well the first time, fell for it again.

“Awwwww, he really *means* it!” Incomprehensibly, their praise was *louder* than before. I could hold my tongue no longer.

“Oh, come *on*. There’s no way you’re buying this - just look at him, he knows exactly what he’s doing!”

My accusation was taken poorly, particularly by Paloma, the jewel of Africa. Unhappy that her moment in the spotlight was being questioned, she glared at me, with visceral contempt, for the remainder of the activity. The sun was setting, so we decided to go down to the beach to watch. Afterwards, while we walked back in the dark along the trail, I found myself behind Paloma. Her suitor, whose confidence was now unchecked, periodically ran up behind her to spank her playfully before hurrying away back down the trail and out of her sight. She never turned around, seeming to enjoy their flirty little exhibition. The next time he snuck to make another pass, I joked to him that I’d been taking turns with him to spank her too, but she just hadn’t realized yet. Although she had seemingly been in conversation, she instantly stopped in her tracks to wheel around and scream at me.

“I knew it was you! You’re a terrible person!”

Thankfully, her lover knew I was kidding and restrained her

as she started towards me, pointing out to her that I'd been walking about ten feet behind and talking with somebody else (who, for the record, corroborated my alibi). I let him do the talking and managed to refrain from asking why she hadn't turned around even *once* if she had been so sure it was me.

Thankfully, we were interrupted: somebody got a text message and excitedly announced that another small group would soon be joining us. One of the imminent arrivals, a pretty Australian girl, had been caught by a rogue wave while surfing earlier in the day and, in the tumult, had been hit in the head by her surfboard. A few friends had stayed with her until she'd seen a doctor in the afternoon, and they now sent warning ahead to the campsite.

"She was slashed across the face by one of the surfboard fins. Whatever you do, *don't* point it out when you see her."

I panicked; I had never seen a victim of a catastrophic head injury before, and I didn't know the recommended protocol.

When the latecomers eventually arrived, we rushed over to their car with bated breath. Finally, our victim emerged. She had a scratch about a centimeter long close to her temple with a narrow strip of tape across it, but otherwise seemed happy and healthy. Was that it? I hugged her and, in my relief that the situation's severity had clearly been exaggerated, forgot the instruction we'd been given a few minutes before. As we separated, I gestured towards her forehead.

"We're surprised you could make it, it looks like you were nearly decapitated - I almost didn't recognize you!"

I chuckled, thinking I'd handled it well and broken the ice for the rest of the group. But as I heard the gasps from the American girls and saw the surfer reach up instinctively to cover the mark, I knew, for the second time that evening, that my contributions were unwelcome. Brian, from Vermont, put his arm around one of the New York girls and began to console her as if she'd just been rescued from a burning building; he'd have draped a foil trauma blanket over her if one was on hand. Incidentally, it was the same girl he'd been hitting on since we had arrived - what were the

chances? When he clocked that he was leaving invaluable chivalry points on the table, he seized his chance to consolidate.

“No *real* man would *ever* make fun of a woman.” After dropping this hammer blow upon me, he then glanced down from the corner of his eye to check if his chosen young woman was impressed. It seemed like she was, so he tacked on a solemn, pious conclusion.

“Jack, there are some things you just can’t joke about. I hope you learn that one day.”

Not wanting to further provoke the mob, I didn’t respond. I was outnumbered, and we were deep in the wilderness. And besides, I couldn’t be too critical: having seen how well Nicolas’s fireside theatrics had been received, my adversary had adapted on the fly - something I’d proved incapable of. Luckily, Nicolas had brought a guitar to augment his courting efforts and was eager to corral the group back to the fire where they could provide an audience. He wasn’t particularly talented: he was trying, I think, to play Wonderwall, the crowd pleaser by Oasis. Alas, the love-struck crooner only knew one chord, a shortcoming he disguised by strumming it at constantly changing intensities and tempos. Artistic critiques aside, the Spaniard successfully distracted the crowd, and for that I would be eternally grateful.



It was time for dinner. Given South Africa’s rugged, homesteading spirit and tendency towards a meat-heavy diet, simple, outdoor barbecues - known as *braais* - are an integral part of the social culture. As if to emphasize a disdain for culinary pretension, the most popular fare is the spiral-shaped *Boerewors*, which translates to “farmer sausage.” We’d fished one of these from the bargain bin at a small grocery store where we’d stopped on our drive to the campsite.

In retrospect, it’s obvious that the sausage’s days of not being a haven for bacteria had passed - a harsh truth we remained in

denial of until far too late. That said, I'm not sure how much it mattered; we'd never cooked one of these before and definitely botched the job. Our campfire's heat peaked too early in the evening, you see; only by the time we sought to make dinner did we realize our stock of kindling had been exhausted. Had the fire been less pitiful, it might have mounted a sturdier assault, at least exterminating the outermost layer of bacteria who now undoubtedly inhabitants the meat.

Had they known what was in store for them as they waited in that seedy mini-mart, the little eukaryotes would surely have been rubbing their flagella together with glee. Just hours earlier, they'd been vacuum-wrapped in plastic and kept in near-freezing refrigeration. Admittedly, their old life could have been worse, with half a meter of raw ground beef and pork to munch through. Hardy as they were, however, even their previous living arrangement would have hampered their culture's potential for exponential growth. We, the campers, were about to convert their world into a paradise.

We peeled the sweating tube from its sheath of oily clingfilm, allowing the meat (and its passengers) to breathe. We then laid the spiral on the grill, watching the pathetically chaste flames lick the underside of the coiled wiener. Before long, though, there arose another cause for concern: the meat had begun to swell. It seemed wise that we help release the pressure, so we made several small punctures along the tube's outer membrane. We laid the patient back down over the flames (we had airlifted it off the grill to perform this emergency operation) and saw that the bloat seemed to have subsided. We were proud of our efforts but, as we watched on, those of us standing around the grill glanced at each other as we became aware of *another* developing issue: an olive-colored puss was now being secreted from the holes we'd created. We couldn't afford another airlift; the first had already cost us precious minutes, and the fire was already beginning to peter out. Someone broke the worried silence.

"Wait a second, don't they mostly *smoke* meat here, anyway?"

“Good point,” came a response. By a majority vote, we elected to leave the intestines on the grill over the ever-weakening flame, hoping the lack of heat would be made up for by prolonged exposure to the tendrils of smoke rising from the embers. Unfortunately, gusts of wind coming in off the coast carried many of these wisps away before they even reached the meat. We let it sit for an hour before coming back. In retrospect, by leaving the uncovered sausage out in the wild and keeping it just warm enough, we’d created a perfect breeding ground for the culture of bacteria to thrive, doubling every 15 minutes - their maximum speed. Somehow, when we returned, we saw charred grill marks on the meat and took these as sufficient proof that it was edible. I don’t usually eat red meat, which was inconvenient in a country with so many exotic options. Having already passed up ostrich burgers, springbok carpaccio, and warthog steak, I was literally leaving meat on the bone and felt left behind; I didn’t want to miss out on my first authentic braai experience. I poked and dissected the sausage until I found a morsel which appeared to be cooked through, nibbling about a teaspoon’s worth before giving up.

As we settled in for the night, a hiker, a brawny Scouse man, came past our campsite on his way to his tent and offered me a small packet of shortbread cookies, before casually mentioning that we’d better make sure to keep our fire alive through the night as well as put any of our food waste in the special secure bins at the main building. The baboons were watching us from the surrounding woods, he said, and had been known to rip up campsites in search of food. Before striding off into the dark, he reminded us the primates eat meat and that their canines were about two inches long. Given the circumstances, these fun little tidbits were enough to terrify us. We weren’t familiar enough with the animals to know they don’t attack unless threatened, so it was much simpler to assume the worst: we wouldn’t last the night. With the unremitting wind against the Cape shores, it was impossible to tell what was causing the rustling of the vegetation around

us as we sat at the fading campfire. What had been beautiful hills surrounding us now took on an entirely different aura. Now terrified, I scanned every bush and shrub, imagining a pack of well-drilled baboons spread tactically and hiding behind cover. Any evidence of the lingering sunset abandoned us and, as our vision worsened, the thickening darkness left a vacuum for our imaginations to fill. The temperature dropped, and eventually we retreated to our tents.

After a few hours, I was wracked with agonizing stomach cramps. This may have been psychosomatic, a delayed result of my public disgrace, but I thought it more likely a reaction to the rotting meat. My digestive system had resisted the toxins for as long as it could, but the crippling pain now prevented me from falling back asleep. I sat up and looked around: nobody else seemed to be suffering any adverse effects. I then realized I could no longer see the fire through the thin polyester of the tent wall. Panicking, I hurriedly unzipped the entrance, scurrying over to the fire pit to blow on the embers in hopes of reigniting the little flame which, not unlike myself, had also given a poor account of itself that evening: not only had it been completely useless during our braai attempt, but it was now absconding from duty as the only thing standing in the way of our gruesome deaths.

I sat for a minute before succumbing to the pain, rolling over into a fetal position in the sandy dirt. It was freezing cold, and the wind had picked up. I'd left my blanket in the tent but could barely move. I could hear the trees groan around me and the waves crashing on the rocky shore nearby, but I could see almost nothing beyond our small ring of tents. What a miserable way to go. Then, in my exhausted, feverish paralysis, I wondered if this might be an opportunity to salvage my reputation. At this point, atonement was surely impossible; my only option was to overshadow earlier events with a more compelling narrative: martyrdom should do it. The savage baboons surrounding our campsite could yet prove valuable assets to this end: their chieftain would be my Pontius Pilate. But we still needed plausible motive -

ideological, ideally. We knew these baboons had complex social dynamics and communication; we could work from there. They had used their intelligence to convert to neofascism: the apes, frustrated that their turf was being encroached by the local townships, were looking to retaliate. I, the volunteer, in my innocent support of the black community, offered as good a chance as any to send a message.

Not perfect, but it would do. All there was left to do now was wait. But would my apotheosis be obvious enough to the search party that stumbled across my ravaged body? I still had a few minutes left before I got vivisected, I reckoned, and had half a mind to pull out a tent stake and give myself some stigmata to drive home the point. Alas, no torch-and-pitchfork-equipped lynch party arrived to take me away. I was woken from a restless half-sleep by the sunrise. My stomach, bruised and tender, seemed to have come through the worst of the pain.

My survival, unfortunately, meant I was left to travel home with the others. My *deux faux-pas* from the night before more or less cemented my status as a pariah. By my own hand, I'd become the perfect pantomime villain against whom the other boys could juxtapose themselves.



Alas, the conquests of Nicolas (and, I suppose, Greg) proved anomalous. Unfortunately for the other guys, the release they so longed for seemed unattainable; their increasingly desperate efforts were mostly fruitless. They often blamed this on timing: their girl in question, perhaps, had flown home before their emotional spark could be consummated. (We were assured, invariably, that an erotic summit had been imminent). Another (admittedly more plausible) hindrance was the housing infrastructure, which was particularly inhospitable to any couples seeking to become, in the biblical sense, one flesh. This was especially relevant in the co-ed accommodations, given how little privacy was

offered; bedrooms, bathrooms, and common rooms were all shared.

Unsurprisingly, this venereal logjam meant the boys' bunk rooms became incubators for a fevered desperation, which became so insidious that it subsumed even newcomers, who ought to have been totally carefree. This made their struggle more difficult to take seriously but, regrettably, no less insufferable; especially so during social gatherings. Despite my interactions with the other guys being infrequent, and always brief, I was regarded as a threat nonetheless: whenever I found myself in casual conversation with a girl, it was never too long before the guy who'd evidently claimed her would barge over to interpose himself, slightly out of breath from fighting through the crowd. Two Mexican guys (whose tails had been raised, I suspect, by Brian's sanctimonious rebuke on the camping trip) were particularly territorial. I never took their brashness too personally; we shouldn't, after all, attribute to malice what is adequately explained by stupidity - or, in this case, by horniness.

Still, I only had so many cheeks to turn before my stores of patience were exhausted. The final straw was laid one evening while I was visiting their house after school. A few of us were discussing whether we ought to walk or take a taxi to a local restaurant. If we wanted to walk, I said, we'd be better off waiting for tomorrow afternoon; the trip would be safer with more daylight. One of my amigos overheard me from across the room and barreled over, making sure a couple of his female targets were in earshot before he began.

"You know what we call you? *Preocupado* - it means worried. You're always so stressed. But you have to understand - This is Africa. Yes, there's crime, there's violence, there's dangerous animals. But you have to relax, or you won't enjoy it!"

I knew there was a grain of truth somewhere in his advice, so I took the nickname as a compliment. And I knew none of this was his fault; caught, as he was, in the clutches of a force far stronger than himself.

11

BROTHERLY LOVE

Greg left for home soon after, apparently ready to rekindle things with his muse back in New York. Before he left, he inexplicably gifted our bike to the young daughter of the family who lived downstairs. I only realized what he'd done when someone sent me a picture she had posted online, featuring her posing with (what she had captioned as) her "New Bike!" As Greg was already on his way to the airport, it fell to me to venture down from the apartment and repossess it. I called him that evening before he boarded his flight, but he played dumb:

"Sorry dude, didn't think you'd care."

This was a lie; the bike provided vital agency in a region so dangerous for lone pedestrians, and he knew I still had a month left. Although I managed to reclaim the bike, he got the last laugh: the next day, he posted (without crediting me) the video I'd captured during the shark dive, and within a few weeks it had been viewed by thousands of people.

Thankfully, the guys who arrived to fill the apartment seemed far more agreeable. Arun, it turned out, had proven a pretty flimsy basket to place my eggs, but my new housemates being good company spared me from needing to spend much time with the other volunteers, who never really forgave me for sticking up for

their Indian nemesis. One of the newcomers, from Southampton, had enlisted in the English navy but his deployment had been pushed back, giving him a few free months during which he'd decided to travel the world. He'd just arrived from the Southeast Asia leg of his tour and, by the sounds of it, had got his money's worth: "Thailand was amazing, I was like a god there. I have to take a pill for the next few weeks that makes my pee look radioactive, but other than that, I'm totally fine."

The other two were a quiet German and a bearded, slow-talking Hawaiian. We were still getting to know each other a week or so in, but our little clique seemed harmonious. I was happy to show them around, and we visited food markets, went to the beach, and went on a couple of hikes. They were keen to see the city itself, where I'd hitherto only spent a few hours at street level (other than my walking tour early on, I'd really only seen it from above, atop the surrounding mountains) and so was happy to join them.



The city proper has a few main districts: the Waterfront, with its shopping mall and observation Ferris wheel a-la the London Eye, the central business district, the downtown area with a handful of skyscrapers and high rises. The rest of the city bowl, and most of its slopes, are populated by quieter, residential neighborhoods like Oranjezicht and Tamboerskloof. With so much of the city having suffered crippling demolition or economic abandonment - such as the aforementioned District Six - the only majority-nonwhite residential neighborhood that's retained its own distinct identity (and is of any interest to tourists) is Bo-Kaap. During apartheid, the neighborhood was designated a racially segregated area, and it's still mostly inhabited by Cape Malay, a majority-Islamic faction of the colored population.

Since then, however, it's been realized that the well-situated, quiet neighborhood on the slopes of the city bowl is, by any

metric, prime real estate. The neighborhood, whose modest homes are made famous by their striking, brightly-colored facades, has now been designated a protected heritage site in the hopes of slowing the encroachment of gentrification. The narrow streets are lined by two (or sometimes three, but never more) storied homes of bright or pastel yellows, pinks, and blues.

Although this practice started long before the advent of social media (admittedly, its exact origins are unknown), it was unwittingly tailor-made for a world in which many travelers' sole intent is to relay evidence of their travels to the public via eye-catching photography. However protected the neighborhood is with regards to zoning and preservation, this legislation does little to mitigate - and, perhaps, unintentionally perpetuates - the unremitting flow of luxury tour buses (the same ones that hurtle down and back the length of peninsula to the Cape of Good Hope). Mercifully, the narrow streets are almost impossible for the vehicles to navigate (not for lack of trying), and so most of them park just inside the neighborhood's borders, letting their hordes of selfie-stick brandishing tourists flood the streets.

The bohemian, communal tone set by these curated, manicured facades is, aptly, deceptive. Muggings, I learned, are common (and, given the target demographic, I'd assume pretty straightforward). Though the neighborhood only spans a few square blocks, straying from the main two or three streets is unwise. Criminals are known to patrol the side streets, waiting for a lone, vulnerable tourist to explore any of the less-traveled (but still enticingly-decorated) side streets. The neighborhood's law-abiding, longtime residents have long called for increased police presence, but they've found support hard to come by.

For now, the locals, many of whom look like they were hoping to sit peacefully on their porches, watch on wearily as they're filmed and photographed by foreign passersby. Not always intentionally, mind you. The tourist posing on the sidewalk was likely just using the houses' facade as an artistic backdrop for their flirty or silly pose. Not to worry, though; photography apps, I learned,

were now so advanced that they allowed for comprehensive editing on the go. The evening after our visit, one girl, a new volunteer living down the road who'd asked to join us, noticed that her backdrop had been ruined by a local octogenarian for whom she hadn't accounted. She edited the pesky man out in seconds, restoring the fuchsia home to its untainted glory.



We usually relaxed in the common room after coming back from our respective schools and, one Friday afternoon, we'd bought a case of beer. After finishing his first round, the Hawaiian made his way over to the refrigerator. I'd finished mine, too.

"Hey Dave, could you grab me a beer while you're up?"

"Sure thing, my dude."

His relaxed, skater-bro drawl was exaggerated, and his parlance included turns of phrase like, "That's rad, home-dawg," and "Could you flip on the 'fi, brah?" (*Fi* as in *Wi-Fi*: during their first few weeks, I'd invited them to share my internet hotspot). He never broke character, so we just assumed he had some sort of high-functioning aphasia.

"Hey, David, could I have one too?" the German asked.

"Yeah, but that's not my name. It's *Day-vid*."

"Oh, sorry. It's difficult for me to say it that way. And I have a friend from my hometown named David, so if I pronounce it *Dahvid*, it is just habit, not intentional."

"Look, bro. I don't care. That's not my name."

The German was visibly embarrassed. Though he had quite a strong accent, his grasp of English was impressive, and he'd always been light-hearted and self-effacing about any misunderstandings and mistranslations. There were certainly no grounds for us to be pedantic and critical, so this was jarring and uncomfortable to witness. I looked across to the neon-urined Englishman, whose bewildered expression mirrored my own. Alas, David wasn't smirking or looking to us for approval. No "HA! Gotcha! I was

just messing with you - of course I don't actually care" moment arrived. This didn't seem to be a misguided attempt to entertain. I intervened to lighten the mood.

"*Dayvid, Dabvid*. Potayto, potahto. Who cares?"

The Englishman followed suit.

"Yeah, this is ridiculous! Bring me a beer, *Dahvid!*"

I tried to catch the German's eye to show him we were on his side. Laughing with relief, he joined in.

"Three beers please, Mr. *Dahvid!*"

Hoping our efforts had relieved the tension, we turned to the lanky pothead. He returned from the fridge and set the bottles down on the table, sitting down and leaning back in his chair. He seemed to relax, closing his eyes and sighing, resting his nose on the tented fingers he held before his face. For a moment, I was optimistic. After all, just minutes before, the bearded, Puka-neck-laced guru - the ripe old age of thirty, ten years our elder - had been espousing the pillars of Buddhism: the inner tranquility which comes from a life spent in pursuit of mindfulness and simplicity.

But the uneasy silence lingered. I started to suspect that he hadn't appreciated our jokes one bit. He took off his Rasta beanie and set it down calmly, then pushed his chair back and stood up. He slowly strode around the table to stand over the seated teenager. Without saying a word, he squatted slightly, then drew back his fist and struck the boy in the sternum with a vicious jab. He then straightened up, went back over to his seat calmly, put the beanie back on and sat down.

"What the hell!" I said, rushing over to check on his wheezing victim, who had crumpled to the floor, the wind completely knocked out of him. "He didn't mean anything by it. You can't just do that!"

But David's nonchalant façade was already back in place.

"Don't worry, bro, let's all just chillax. It's all good in the 'hood."

Bizarrely, I believed he was telling the truth, inasmuch as his

interpretation of events: in his view, he'd been presented with an issue and had acted swiftly and decisively to resolve it. Apparently, there are some lines you *just don't* cross, and someone had to be held accountable for the infraction, bro. Sure, the degree of violence he'd employed was arguably excessive, but he'd derived no particular joy, disciplining the boy with mechanical, deliberate precision.

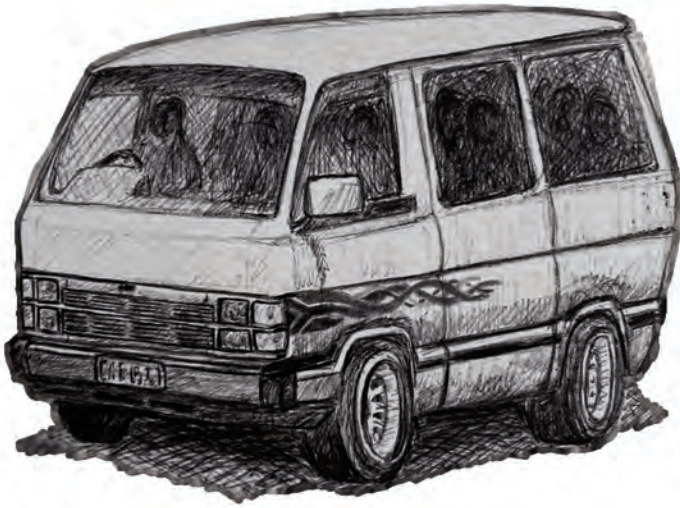
Despite David's relaxed attitude immediately after the incident, it took the rest of us a few days to recover, or at least recalibrate emotionally.



Fortunately, we were soon presented with an opportunity for group bonding. In the next week's groceries, management inexplicably provided several massive cartons of eggs - at least twelve by twelve. None of us had seen anything of the like. Our small refrigerator had no extra space, so we kept the pallets on the floor by the entrance. After a week, we'd only eaten four or five of the eggs between us. As Craig stooped down to fetch one to make his breakfast one morning, he noticed a small sticker on the side of the package. It was no wonder our coordinators had been so generous: the eggs had expired two weeks ago. At this point, the only fitting use for them was recreation.

There was a four-lane motorway about fifty meters away which divided our neighborhood from several acres of undeveloped land and, a kilometer or so further inland, a township. From our porch on the second floor, we had a perfectly clear sightline to the road. Given a magnificent heave with the proper arc, the eggs would explode, appearing to almost vaporize on impact with the tarmac. When we were sure there were no cars or pedestrians around, we had competitions for distance, accuracy, and loudest splat. We had a few scares; given the hang time of the projectiles, it was possible (though unlikely) a speeding car could come into range of the landing zone, especially given that a few service roads

were in our blind spot from the porch. Hitting a taxi van would have been a disaster - these screamed down the highway on set routes from the townships to the city, as vital - but unsanctioned - public transport. The routes were often managed by crime mobs who were constantly at war: with each other for turf, and with the police over licensing and permissions. Drivers were always being pulled over for transporting far more passengers than the vehicles could safely transport. In one routine traffic stop during my time there, the police found forty-six children packed inside a van designed to seat nine.



12

BITTER/SWEET

My time was almost up. I knew how special my last few months had been, how lucky I was to have had so many unique experiences. I should have been brimming with gratitude and pride, bonding with the others and making the most of my remaining moments. But these last two or three weeks were bittersweet. I'd never been this far from home, nor had I traveled alone for longer than a week. This had caught up to me, and I withdrew into myself. Homesickness is a horrible wall to hit, especially when there's a departure date set and you're desperate for your trip to end on a high. Despite knowing I had only a handful of days left to enjoy this country to which I might not return, I found it impossible to re-energize myself once the feeling of being fed up had enveloped me. I felt numb, a shell of myself. I struggled to remain present enough to enjoy activities with the group, and stopped bothering to learn any of the new volunteers' names altogether, as it was too difficult to keep up with the ever-changing roster. Though I'm sure it seemed it, my grouchy reclusiveness wasn't performative; any willpower I'd arrived with to be social and outgoing really had been utterly spent. This created a frustrating dissonance: I was painfully aware that I was squandering whatever time remained, while also resenting the others for (seem-

ingly) having no hang-ups of their own. I only found the naïve exuberance of the new volunteers grating and was therefore unable to siphon off any of their energy to kickstart myself.

And so, even though nobody else was ever assigned to my school, I was grateful - for the other volunteers' sake, as much as mine; I'd have been horrible to work with. Besides, once I'd regained my voice after those first weeks, I had the situation mostly under control and, for my pride's sake, I felt obligated to see out the rest of the job. How would I be able to look myself in the eye if I were to put in the hard yards, only to see some schmuck waltz in and steal the limelight? Worse, what if it became a cuckoo scenario whereby my assistant somehow became the favorite? I'd be gradually phased out and eventually rendered surplus to requirements. Horrifying - not on my watch. *I* was the lone protagonist here, and I'd already pushed the boulder this far up the mountain without any help. Not that I divulged any of this. At every opportunity, I relished recounting my sob story as the overworked and under-appreciated hero. Though I derived immense enjoyment from this, I truly had become sentimental and felt quite protective of my students. I'd adored my time with them, and I'd like to think this was mostly reciprocated: I'd get dozens of high-fives and hugs when I passed by groups in the hallways between class, and most of the kids referred to me as "Uncle Jack," a colloquial term of endearment.



I spent most of my free time watching tennis; thankfully there were multiple tournaments on, which kept me busy. I'd wander down most days to the marina pub and hang around for a few hours, ordering a juice or soda every once in a while. During my last week, the Davis Cup Final was on; Switzerland were against the hosts, France. For whatever reason, my usual pub wasn't open, so I walked over to the beach café frequented by the volunteers who lived on that side of the estuary as it had offered a

better internet connection than they could get at their accommodation - and, they'd told me, had a television. Thankfully, these reports were true; I watched on as Roger Federer, objectively the greatest player to have ever held a racket, easily beat Richard Gasquet, to clinch the title. During the last set, the table next to mine had been filled by an older man sitting across from a boy in his early teens: a father and son. The pair were sitting behind bowls of ice cream. I hung around after the match finished to earwig (a boorish habit, I know). A few uncomfortable minutes went by, during which the dad made a few futile attempts at small talk. Their ice creams remained untouched. Eventually, the father broached what was clearly the real reason for their meeting.

“You know John, this doesn't have to be the end of the world. Everything will be fine - it'll all be OK. I'll see you on the weekends, and I'm still going to come to all of your cricket matches. Anyway, tell me how things have been going at school.”

There was a pleading, tender rawness in the dad's tone; whatever pain the family was going through was fresh. He had clearly been looking forward to seeing his son and was desperately searching the child's face for any evidence he might be amenable to normalcy - or even just feigning it for the dad's sake. Not wanting to disturb them or draw attention to myself, I pretended to watch the muted television in the corner, whose channel had been switched to a close-captioned soap opera. I furrowed my brow and nodded along. I knew I was intruding, but I was riveted as I awaited the outcome of this pregnant scene.

“Sorry sir - are you done here? It's just that we'll be serving dinner soon, and these tables need to be made up.”

Dammit - a waitress was taking a cleaning rag to the tables, and had noticed my idleness; I was being kicked out. I took my time collecting my things before eventually leaving. From the street, I peered back inside. I was desperate to see how things turned out. The boy had seemed reticent, but perhaps the waitress had spurred them on to tuck into their now-thawed ice cream. It

was getting dark, so I had to head home. There would be no resolution. Not for me, at least.



The next day at school was my last, so I visited each of the younger classes to say goodbye. I'd brought over from the US several packs of crayons and few dozen little coloring books that I planned to drop off as leaving gifts as I made my rounds. At my first stop, a first-year class, I watched one of the quieter kids gleefully unpack the fresh crayons before flipping to a page at random: a farm scene. He colored black spots on a cow and used bright pink to fill in the lines on a family of pigs. Incidentally, Elmo was visiting this farm - I'd bought this Sesame Street-themed book thinking the brand was ubiquitous, but evidently my

presumption was incorrect: the little boy, thinking Elmo was just any old man, colored him brown. As I looked down into that boy's sweet little face, I felt a swell of emotion. (Was that a lump in my throat or just my acid reflux acting up?) What a powerful visual metaphor this was for the value of connecting with those whose worlds differ fundamentally from our own.

It was an exam day for the older classes, and after they finished their tests in the afternoon all the students were let out for recess. I'd brought my camera with me, filming as I walked through the school's hallways. I got lots of group hugs, and I'm even convinced I saw one third-year wiping a tear (though this wasn't captured on tape). I wandered around with a couple of the younger kids who didn't want to leave my side. I wanted to walk around to the other side of the main school building, which was where the older classes socialized. Absorbed, as they were, in the dramas of adolescent life, these kids didn't seem as devastated by my imminent departure. Oh, well - my work here was done.

World? Changed.

Perspective? Gained.

African roots? Consider them intertwined-with.

All the same, I opted against getting a T.I.A. tattoo of my own. Going to Africa had changed the course of my life, which would be enough of a reminder for me. And it would have been impossible to top the girls' attempt, anyway. This trip marked the true beginning of my adulthood, representing solitude, discovery and escape, while providing me with validation that a departure from the standard trajectory was entirely possible. It had been challenging, of course, but I'd done it. I'd actually done it. But I should have learned my lesson from that interminable bungee jump: never celebrate until you're out of the woods.

The morning I was scheduled to fly home, I went for one last run around the neighborhood and the marina. I came back and lay down for a nap, only to be awoken by two policemen standing over me.

"We've gotten a few reports from drivers in the area that their

cars have been targeted with rocks. Is this something you know anything about?” My life flashed before my bleary eyes as I imagined being hurled into a cell on Robben Island. After all my brushes with death (and subjugation), I couldn’t believe I was destined for so forgettable a fate: *It was the seventy-four counts of egg-tossing what did for ‘im*. How anticlimactic, like Al Capone getting sent away for a measly tax evasion charge. Thankfully, the officers believed my claims of ignorance and left me to continue their manhunt. Now fully awake, I set about packing for my flight to London, desperate to get out of there before the police realized they’d let me off the hook too easily.

I was still on edge as I checked in and passed through security that evening, half expecting Interpol to have thrown me onto the no-fly list before I made it to the airport. Luckily, my passport didn’t bounce and I was allowed to continue into the terminal. When I finally got to my gate, I found an empty seat and collapsed blissfully: I was finally headed back to the familiar world. I was still bubbly when we boarded, striking up a conversation with two elderly woman flying home to London. As we took off, I peered out the window to the setting sun. The glowing core was already partway down, but still looked impossibly large, a heat-rippled golden yolk sinking from a sky of bruised purple. It occurred to me that this might be my last South African sunset. I had been so emotionally burned out, so preoccupied at the thought of leaving, that I hadn’t considered the act itself and what that might entail. The sun started to blur into the clouds, and I realized my eyes were welling up. Perhaps this wasn’t going to be as straightforward as I’d expected.

13

DEBRIEF

To my surprise, by the time I'd been home just a few weeks, the boredom, loneliness, and angst I'd felt while abroad ebbed away. This allowed me to assess, contextualize - and even appreciate - the trip, all of which I'd found impossible to do in the moment. I'd heard about your memory playing tricks on you post-travel, but now experienced this for myself.

Difficulties that had once felt insurmountable now seemed embarrassingly trivial, or were forgotten altogether. In their absence, I was left, curiously, not with empty space but with their filmic negative. Along with the obvious draws (the agreeable weather, the unforgettable landscape), I found myself desperately missing the country's subtler attributes; its trimmings: its smells, accents, flavors, brands. It wasn't about whether these offerings were better or worse than their American equivalents. Indeed, I'd even begun to think fondly of the more counterintuitive, less quantifiable aspects: its quirks, idiosyncrasies, and inefficiencies. In fact, the country's lack of coherence, its not being obsessed with optimization was refreshing. More important, beyond their being novel, was that these variables had simply been present, providing the staging and scaffolding for so many experiences and discoveries, positive or otherwise.

The country had suffered, yes, but it had so much promise. It had too many endearing quirks, too much character to bet against. Perhaps my soft spot was because I too, was in a transitional phase: potential was there to be realized, if they could just manage to get their affairs in order. The only way was up.

I thought back to that commemorative chunk of the Berlin Wall. Fukuyama argued that the reunification of Germany in 1992 marked a watershed moment - and not only for Europe, but the world. A repressive system had been toppled, literally, with its once-imposing barriers hacked to pieces and given out as souvenirs. With the Cold War over, and the specter of Communism having been defeated, the world could drop its guard; its doors were open for business: Come one, come all! With the specter of communism vanquished, liberal democracy could - and *would* flourish. In this new epoch, a rising tide would lift all boats from the doldrums of brutality and subsistence by encouraging and, crucially, *incentivizing* cooperation and inclusion. The Holocene, as we knew it, had reached its political and economic zenith. It wasn't perfectly refined just yet, but it was headed that way. It was only a matter of time before South Africa, having overcome insurmountable odds to topple a draconian regime of its own soil, would dust itself off, sidle up to the global marketplace and avail itself of the wares on offer: peace, democracy, and prosperity. Mandela had managed to oversee the country's transition with miraculous poise, advocating for peaceful cooperation and forgiveness rather than resentment and hostility.

This was epitomized immediately after the fall of apartheid. The 1995 Rugby World Cup was imminent, and the newly-democratized South Africa was set to host. But the country's governing body for rugby and the national team itself, the Springboks, had been inextricably linked to the apartheid regime and thus remained symbols of a viciously segregated society, the memory of which was fresh. Regardless, Mandela, and ordered the team's name, logo, and colors to remain unchanged. Changing the iconography would have alienated longtime fans on the

domestic front, many of whom still held financial and political power. Moreover, the team was one of the country's most invaluable cultural exports. The president, savvy to the global reach of sport, saw this as a unique opportunity to promote the themes of unity and pride. Through this tournament, South Africa could show the world (and itself) it was healing. If the face of the country, who'd been imprisoned by the whites for 27 years, for Christ's sake, had managed to exhibit such impressive equanimity, the country would surely be fine.

Thabo Mbeki had the impossible job of succeeding Mandela. Other than being an AIDS denialist, he did a decent job keeping things chugging along (though I suppose this isn't strictly true: it was under his leadership that the country's power supply began to fail). Jacob Zuma, an ANC lifer whose moral scruples were, by all accounts, objectionable at best, had taken over and had now been in power for a few years. But as long as Mandela (who'd remained the smiling face of the self-professed Rainbow Nation even after his presidency) was still kicking around, background concerns could be minimized. Alas, the country's beacon of hope couldn't shine forever; Mandela had died in late 2013, less than a year before I first arrived. For now, it seemed like there remained a collective desire to honor the memory of their idol, who they referred to affectionately by his family name, "Madiba." Luckily, the nation's success wasn't reliant solely on morale: Mandela's government had provided the country with an impressively well-designed constitution which meant the country's government and institutions would be robust, efficient and egalitarian. Indeed, though it may not look it, South Africa *is* a democracy. And not just any old democracy, either: a democracy with one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. The question was not whether, but how, this foundation (a disproportionately strong one compared to other underdeveloped countries) would be leveraged for maximum good. Governance would be the key. By properly installing and providing maximal access to decolonized and efficient systems, the government would rehabilitate the atrophied

muscles of intellectual independence, innovation, and civic pride. If nurtured and incubated properly, this would yield not only a more informed populace but a more engaged, curious, and creative one, one invested in a better future and, just as crucially, provided with the tools to work towards it.

That so few depressive sentiments had bled into my memory of the trip or my opinion of the place itself was of particular interest to me, as preventing personal sufferings from tainting my feelings towards where they occurred was a courtesy I hadn't given even to my hometown. South Africa, though no less flawed than the US, had felt like a fresh start. In me, it had gained a life-long fan (not that it had any idea). I now kept an eye out for it in the news, cheered for its sports teams, and gushed about it to anyone who would listen. I remember being told off by a manager at a minimum wage retail job I took a few months after my return. On a dead weekday morning, a man walked in looking for some jeans. I noticed his accent and asked about it. Miraculously, he was from the town next to Muizenberg! We swapped stories for a few minutes. After he left, my manager told me this wasn't a social lounge, and to get back to standing by the sale rack in silence. It was on this day I began ringing every customer up with a 20% discount. "Did you receive our sale coupon in the mail?"

"No. What are you talking about?"

"You received our 20% off coupon, didn't you? I'm sure I heard you mention it."

"No."

"Are you sure? All I have to do is press this button and it'll take \$37 dollars off your order."

At this point, they'd usually catch on.



Though I resolved to return to check back in with my South African pals, I knew a period of convalescence was necessary; being alone and far from home for so long had laid bare my weak-

nesses, and I wanted to be better equipped before I ventured out again.

But what form would reentry take? As far as its stated objectives, the first trip hadn't exactly been a resounding success. Failing to find my Soul Sisters was the least of it. The nagging suspicion I'd had since before I'd even left home had been confirmed: from what I could see, voluntourism was mostly just an indulgence, enabling attention-seeking Westerners to role-play as aid workers for little more than their - fine - *our* own benefit. I'd paid a company about 2,000 dollars for the privilege of babysitting some African children. The school I'd been placed in already had a full-time (though this, as we learned, was up for dispute) gym teacher-cum-cleric, and a roster of perfectly qualified, and lovely, class teachers. I was surplus to requirements. Yes, I'd shared some nice moments with my students. But I'd been bussed into the school's premises from a five-bedroomed apartment near the beach every day and had only been on school property for a few hours before heading home to sit by our swimming pool. By the end of the semester, I'd rejigged my class schedule so that I only needed to show up four days a week. To be clear: my doing the bare minimum is a reflection on nobody but me. From what I could tell, though, most of the others were doing the same thing, and the program organizers seemed to have no problem (a couple of memos notwithstanding). Whatever relief we'd provided the schools, the country, or its children was, I feared, negligible.

With our volunteer program and others like it being for-profit, it would have been unthinkable to enforce a more rigorous entrance exam, ensuring that only applicants with a nuanced understanding of colonialism, race relations, historical geopolitical context, and so forth, were admitted to the program. Disabusing prospective applicants of unhealthy misconceptions would threaten their bottom line; they'd be pissing on their own parade. So long as they stump up the cash, Arun, Greg, or anyone else can show up whenever they want. What results is very little regulation as far as narrative; editorial control is ceded fully to self-

important missionaries (secular or otherwise) who will, with very little exception, drastically overestimate their contributions. One woman I met between trips ran a charity in a township outside Cape Town; they preferred donations but wouldn't turn away Westerners who wanted to visit. After a week or so, these credulous visitors invariably celebrated that they'd converted every last one of the orphans to whatever religion or denomination they'd been sent by. The woman I talked to said it was better to let them leave believing this was true, rather than give them the rather dispiriting news that the same orphan had pledged her life to the Mennonites just last week. In fairness, a large portion of this is likely in self-preservation as much as anything else: nobody wants to admit having blown thousands of dollars and *not* having put a sizable dent in the issues of whichever hellhole they'd sent themselves into.

The exotic locales and people we meet (or just see) on these trips means they're disproportionately susceptible to dramatization. These trips, especially with the advent of social media, are far, far more valuable to us than the children we claim to have saved. And not in the corny, "those kids taught me..." way, either; I mean helpful in terms of displaying our virtue to those back home. Attention seeking at home is one thing, but at least it's contained. But using countries like South Africa to indulge our savior complexes - and our mythomania - is far more irresponsible. The "let people enjoy things" argument only holds water if those activities truly *are* harmless - and our misguided humanitarianism, it turns out, is not.

Our earnest attempts to save the world are easy to ridicule, but understandable. With the news having got out about slavery and colonialism, there's only one correct reaction: anyone with a heart and a conscience must show contrition. You can't exactly say that you're proud of your country's culture or its history, that you're not sorry, that you don't feel ashamed. After all, the only people saying things like that are members of the Red Team. What are you, a traitor? If living in denial is decidedly evil, we

must do the opposite, which, we intuit, includes but isn't limited to: self-flagellation, shame, groveling, and general fussing. Whatever you do, you don't want to be seen resting on your laurels.

But saddling ourselves with individualized responsibility means we've bought in: we, the West - more specifically, its citizens, its consumers, can be the Liberators these unfortunates so desperately need. For Westerners, pity for (or suspicion of) the outside world isn't, as they say, a bug - it's an intended feature. Even for those who purportedly disagree with Imperial ideology, with American and European exceptionalism, and so on. Pity and suspicion sound very different, but they're rooted in the same place; an internalized hierarchy: some countries are there to be traveled to and pitied, while others aren't; some places and peoples need help, while others are to do the helping.

I should add that our hubris isn't necessarily our own doing: it's instilled in us by a system that demands maximum individuation, maximum solipsism. We are the protagonists of the universe; superheroes, capable of solving any problem and clearing any hurdle put before us. Follow your dreams, no matter how unlikely; shoot for the moon - even if you miss, you'll land among the stars. It's no wonder a majority of people born after 2000 say their dream career is to be famous. Infinitesimal odds and unlikely personal circumstances aren't sufficient reason to quit; you may just have to work a little harder - nothing wrong with that. The more self-reliance and resilience are required to overcome our circumstances, the more admirable we - and our respective stories - are. The caveat of this uplifting sentiment is that, in practice, it actually becomes more of a directive - a threat, even - whose implication is that, since you can be anything you decide to be, you can't be nothing. You can't *do* nothing.

In any case, this leaves us in quite the quagmire: delusions of grandeur, impatience, an outsized appetite for showing how virtuous we are (read: imposing ourselves on the world), but provided with neither the tools nor the wherewithal to channel

this in a healthy or productive way. We simultaneously crave attention and approval but are crippled by performance anxiety.

It's really no wonder that we make for ideal patsies to take the fall for crimes we had no hand in committing. Look at how the responsibility for fixing climate change has been personalized: You, there! Yes, you! You thought brushing your teeth was a victimless crime? Wrong. Even those few seconds are critical. If you're a good person and care about the ice caps not melting, you'll turn off the tap and make sure the lights are out when you leave the room. If you don't, you may as well have held the last remaining polar bear cub underwater and drowned him yourself. Nice one, jackass.

A similar ploy is used when it comes to foreign aid: somewhere over yonder, there are brown people who are sick, dying, diseased, hungry, thirsty. But don't fret; for only three dollars, you could feed one of them for a week, saving his life in the process. Well? What say you? Well, if all of what we're told is true, their fates are in my (and your) incredibly powerful hands. Once their poverty-stricken souls have been put on the market, every vote [dollar] we *don't* send their way is tantamount to an emperor's Thumbs Down. Thankfully, we're spared the uncomfortable bit where we have to look them in the eyes as they're disemboweled for the crowd's entertainment, but still: manslaughter, or gross negligence at the very least. Either way, morally indefensible.

And this is where unregulated voluntourism organizations step in and make a killing.

But what were my other options? In a perfect world, I'd visit South Africa as I would any other ["real"] country - but was this even possible, ethically speaking?

The sheer proximity of the suffering to even the wealthiest, most luxurious neighborhoods makes claiming ignorance impossible. Indeed, the hillside wineries on the eastern side of the peninsula, in Constantia, for example, look directly out across the Cape Flats. Enjoying the view requires looking out over at least one million poor people for whom visiting a wine farm on a weekday

afternoon would be a preposterous luxury. *And next we have our Sauvignon Blanc, a 2017 Vintage. It's dry and grassy on the lips but rounds out nicely with that late-arriving cornucopia of flavor. You'll notice, I'm sure, bursting notes of grapefruit and acorn, with a distinct pinch of sinus-clearing mustard. Enjoy!*

Depending on the day, the view over to the mainland was blurred by the gray smog hovering over the flats. Though this obscured the Hottentot range, it also blurred the slums below. The tax one pays on a clear day is a high-definition view of the sordid reality. Millions of people trapped in the soul-sucking doldrums, with access to neither the benefits of the mainland nor the glamour of the cape. This is their Africa: no mountains, no safaris, no bungee jumping, no chilled chardonnay.

What were my options, then? Either commit wholeheartedly to the role of credulous humanitarian: live amongst the locals, offer them the shirt off my back; township tours, soup kitchens, and so on. Or pretend there was nothing wrong: "Every country has issues. Don't burden yourself with someone else's problem." There are, I'm assured, many people in the world capable of putting their qualms aside and "living in the moment." I, however, as I believe we've established many times over, am not one of them. Looking out across the townships from your wine farm and pretending the only thing you saw was the mountain range in the distance was no different to what I'd needed to do before that bungee jump. Lock your eyes on the horizon at all costs. Don't let your gaze drop even for a second, or you're screwed. Whatever you think you saw was wrong; there's nothing down there. The screams, the desperate pleas for food and water are a figment of your imagination. *Now, sir, if you'll please: edge forward. That's right, easy does it.*



But there was no time for hand-wringing; the intense relief I'd felt being back home among the familiar comforts had now evapo-

rated, which left me in a kind of liminal space. I now felt markedly less beholden to the US than I had before. I'd always struggled to fit in, but now found this increasingly difficult. And this isn't to say that I felt perfectly suited to South Africa, either. However beautiful it was, however affordable, it couldn't compete with America in terms of providing security, both in a physical sense and an ontological one. So, for as romantic a prospect it might have been, I wasn't quite ready to commit totally to life as an expat. Hopefully nobody would mind if I didn't lock in a decision just yet. I didn't have much power back home, but it turned out I (with some help from my parents) could do pretty well abroad; it was nice to be able to buy a round of drinks without needing to apply for bankruptcy. As long as both places, in their respective ways, made the prospect of living there full-time unappealing, it seemed like my best bet was to stay light on my feet. I had a feeling this would make finding a tribe (my Soul Sisters, if you will) difficult, as it was decidedly unlikely that anyone else's path would be identical to mine. There was nobody who was going to be able to hold my hand. But what was the point of all this if not to facilitate people coming and going at their leisure?

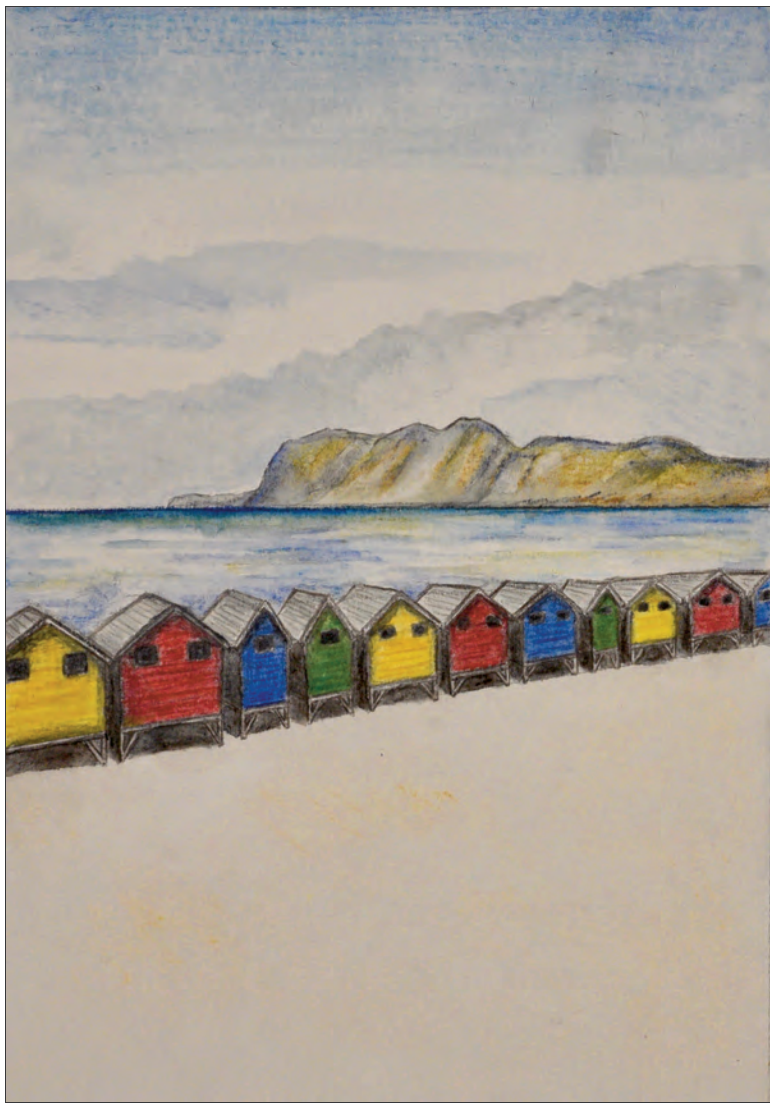
My disenchantment flared up during the ascendance of Trump, a period in which America (and its media coverage) descended fully into self-caricature. Though our buffoonery was, I'm assured, wildly entertaining for outsiders, I'd quickly had my fill. Thankfully, I no longer felt obligated to wade into this all-consuming cultural quicksand; I could now draw on the experience of having been self-reliant and (for the most part) happy by myself on the far side of the world. Alas, this development was decidedly unhelpful as it related to my academic career (and personal finances), especially given my chosen major: political science. In my defense, I'd picked it during the relatively peaceful Obama years, thinking it would be an edifying and stress-free degree. Admittedly, I'd already been wavering; right before leaving for my first trip to Cape Town, I did a 10-week summer internship, working full time as a (poorly-paid) intern for a local politi-

cian. Some of the more interesting incidents were discussions as to whether the intersections in a newly built housing development on the edge of the city ought to be fitted with traffic lights, stop lights, or traffic circles. If this was what my next few years had in store, I was in no hurry to saddle myself with insurmountable debt in its pursuit.

I could have changed tack, but this would mean I'd be starting from scratch; those hideously expensive credits I'd earned my freshman year would be rendered useless. The system from which I'd broken free had already caught up (and so quickly, too). There was no escape. I'd blown my savings, broken away for a few months (the last of which I spent homesick), and was now back home, living in my parents' basement. Being a subpar volunteer I could accept, but this was far worse: I was also a subpar nonconformist.

So, although the anti-gap-year soothsayers had been correct - I didn't long to return to school - I swallowed my pride and signed up for classes at my local community college. After a semester there, I found a reasonably-priced university in Florida which offered to accept both these credits and the ones I'd earned from my first year. I spent a balmy, enjoyable year down in St. Augustine, a charming town whose claim to fame is being the oldest in the US (it was founded by the Spanish long before the pilgrims arrived), but never stopped wondering when - and how - I would get back to South Africa. The opportunity soon arrived. The head of the Study Abroad office retired, and with the new head of department came a rule change: transfer students like me, who'd previously been ineligible, could now apply.

ON LOCATION



Surfer's Corner, Muizenberg



A few of my students



A pair of opportunists (in baboon form), Cape Point



Cape Town skyline, Blaauwberg Beach



*Exploring the (very windy!)
Cape Point*



Me (cynical), near Chapman's Peak



Me (making a new friend), Garden Route bird sanctuary



🦒 *Giraffe, Garden Route safari* 🦒



(Stry) Gibbon, Garden Route monkey sanctuary



Rhinos, Garden Route safari



Zebras, Garden Route safari



More opportunists (these ones in dassie form), Table Mountain



The “Twelve” Apostles, Camp’s Bay



Bo Kaap, Cape Town



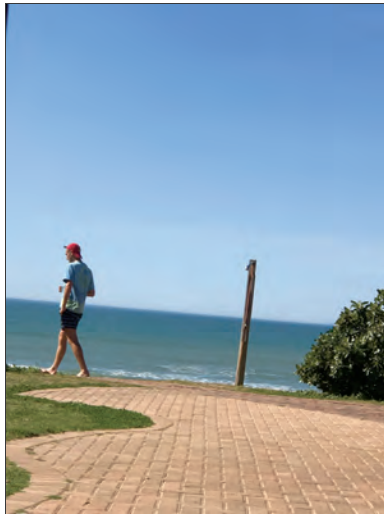
Cape Town Stadium



Innocent (and snacks), Garden Route



Tennis beneath Devil's Peak, Rondebosch



The Grouch (me), enjoying some quiet, Garden Route



You can do it!, Table Mountain



Location, location, location. (Camp's Bay)



Penguin, Boulders Beach



A Lion in rest, looking leftwards (Lion's Head)



University of Cape Town



Walking to class



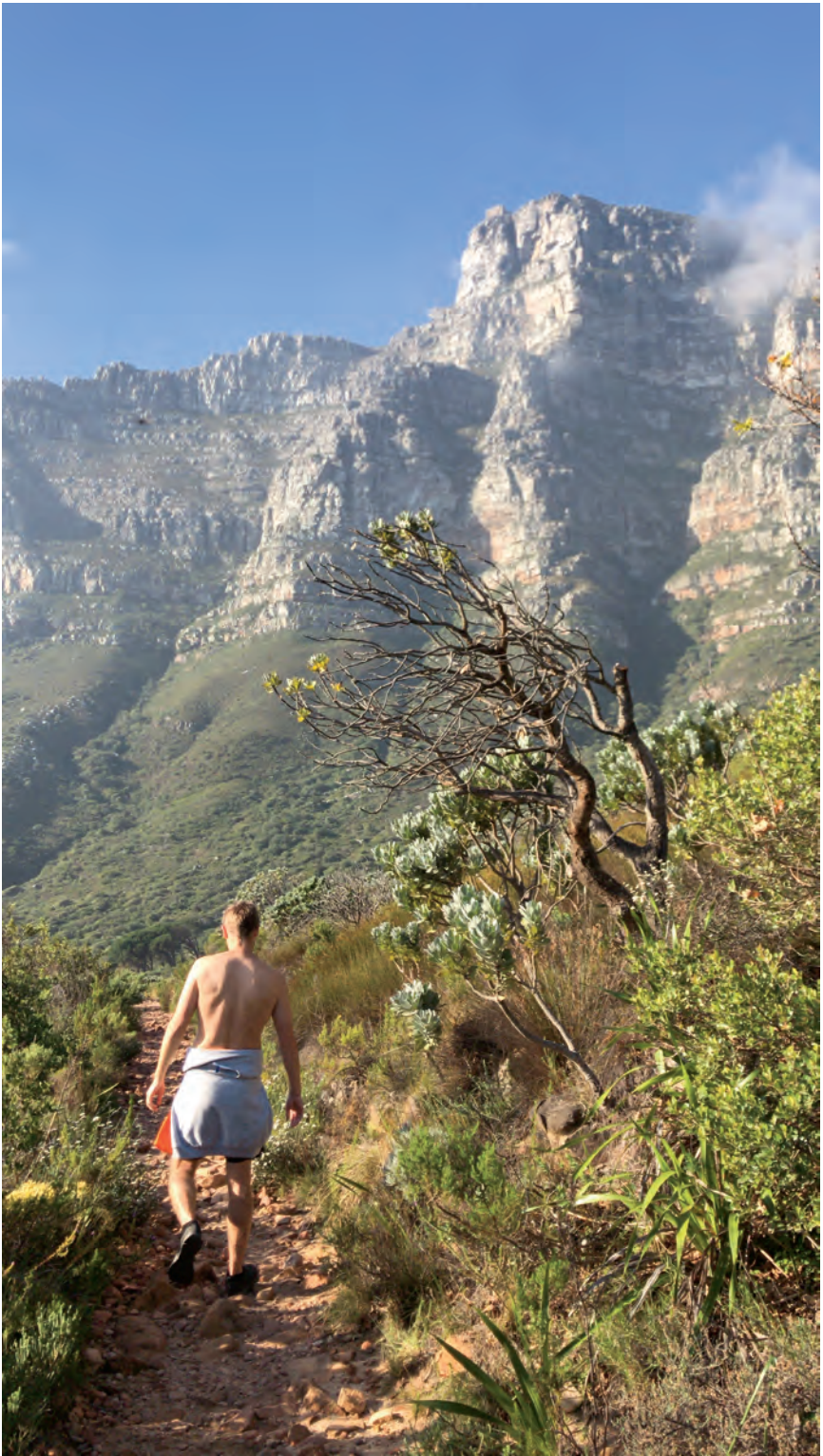
Devil's Peak, Cape Town



Me (pre-shark)



Me (with shark)



ACT TWO
SECOND AND THIRD STINTS

14

RED TAPE

The arrangements for my second trip were to prove far more protracted and aggravating than the first. My university in Florida had a handful of affiliate universities it preferred students to visit (none of which were in South Africa) and was reluctant to let me explore external possibilities; it took me months negotiating with the administrators before I got their assent, and even then it was only given begrudgingly: I had to sign a waiver acknowledging that I was organizing this trip under my own volition, at my own risk, and with my own funds. In an ironic turn of fate, it turned out that the only school where I could do my exchange that year was in a region sympathetic to our new commander in chief: Stellenbosch, whose town and surrounding wine region fancied itself as a “bastion of tradition,” that proudly hearkened back to yesteryear. For reference: it wasn’t far from here that we’d witnessed the lazy scarecrow. Stellenbosch University was the only school near the Cape that was accepting independent students for their upcoming semester; luckily, they accepted my application.

I managed to mediate a tenuous accord between the two schools: I would first drop out of my US school before applying to the South African as an independent traveling student (it had a specific classification for nomadic students like me which I liked:

Freemover). This came with the understanding I'd subsequently withdraw after the semester and reapply to the original in Florida, who would, in turn, plug in my imported credits and (hopefully) allow me to graduate. Thankfully, this final step would only be, as it were, academic: since I'd have fulfilled all of my requirements, I wouldn't actually need to go back to campus in the US.

I was soon alerted, however, that I wasn't in the clear just yet: I was missing two basic credits. One of these was a paltry little half-credit orientation course mandatory for all incoming freshmen. It gave you a brief orientation of the town, the campus, and general help with transitioning into adult life (living alone and away from home, managing your time properly, and so on). By the time the existence of such a class had been brought to my attention (let alone its esteemed status as a requirement for graduation), I'd already lived in the town, alone and hundreds of miles from home, for a year. The advisor in charge of this course was, it turned out, my professor for international law. Thankfully, the registrar told me I just needed her signature and the credit would be waived. The professor and I had developed a good rapport over the semester - her name was Jill, so this was inevitable - and given the nature of her field (an appreciation for logic and reason) I was expecting our meeting to be a quick one. It was: I was back out in the hallway in under a minute.

The only line I remember her saying was, "This isn't McDonald's. You can't just pick whatever you want. You have the same requirements as everyone else." A ironic stance, I thought, from the institution putting tens of millions of young Americans in, on average, \$50,000 dollars of debt under the pretense of letting them do exactly that: pick whatever [future] they want. In every other industry, the customer was always right (the student union had a Chick-Fil-A restaurant actually built in, and in between classes I enjoyed counting how many times the cashiers said "my pleasure" - which they were instructed to give in response to any utterance even close to "thank you.")

Here, though, in the industry kneecapping us the hardest, we

weren't even given the chance to pretend that we were in control. All this for the privilege of paying, in many cases, hundreds of thousands of dollars. Luckily, the other professor who had the power to waive the credit, a kind lady in the archaeology department with what I sensed was a similar disenchantment, didn't even let me finish my rehearsed spiel before snatching the paper from my hands to sign it. *Hang on...maybe this was a McDonald's, after all.*



So that's one redundant requirement waived, one to go. When the registrar's office had perused my academic records, they'd found only an *advanced* algebra credit, which I'd transferred in from my first university. Alas, I was missing its "basic" level. Therefore, instead of graduating immediately upon completion of my semester in South Africa, I'd need to come back to Florida and pay a full semester's-worth of tuition for an entry level class which met once a week. I spent hours arguing to them that, *surely*, my having passed the more advanced course made taking the basic one pointless. This was to no avail, so I offered a compromise: I'd take an equivalent class at my local community college the summer before I left for my exchange. They agreed, with the stipulation that I needed to get an A. So it was settled: my academic future (and thousands of dollars) relied on me passing this course with flying colors. But I was (and remain) terrible at math - I couldn't leave this to chance. Fortunately, the instructor, an old Chinese man, couldn't see anything happening more than a foot beyond his plastic podium; I sat in the back row and used a calculator app on my phone to complete every single assignment (though I made sure to get a few questions wrong here and there so as not to arouse suspicion).

With my math credit in hand, all I needed now was a study permit from the South African Government. This was a new frontier; on my first trip, I'd stayed just 90 days, the maximum

time you were allowed to visit the country visa-free. For the record, entering under the guise of tourism had been an explicit request of the volunteer organization itself. The management team had implied they didn't enjoy coordinating with the national customs and immigration offices (who were notoriously strict regarding which private entities could sponsor international visitors for work or study visas). I'd heard rumors you could take an overnight bus north and reset this imaginary deportation timer by briefly crossing the Namibian border, but I suspected such a trek would be more trouble than it was worth. But even that option was now unavailable, as officially enrolling at Stellenbosch would require a government-issued visa.

The South African embassy's webpage had an eighteen-point list of forms and other documents needed for the application. On the surface, its tasks appeared elementary, but this checklist would prove to be as exacting as anything Zimmer had curated.

First on the docket was the vague request for applicants to show "proof of satisfactory finances." Because their website looked like it hadn't been touched since the turn of the millennium, it seemed wise to do a quick check-in with someone at the office in the case there had been changes or updates to these requirements. When I called the handful of consulates around the country, however, each individual I spoke to gave their own interpretation of the rule. Some implied it was a matter of demonstrating fiscal responsibility and thus suggested I'd need to provide a year or two's-worth of healthy bank statements. Others, meanwhile, indicated that their visa agents would be swayed only by whatever impressive sum of wealth you could prove to them on the morning of your appointment. When they refused to put a specific number on what might qualify as "impressive," I suggested that perhaps a specific minimum wasn't worth stressing about. After all, the country's low cost of living and low exchange rate meant that even the meager reserves of a college student would be more than enough to last a few months. At the time, one dollar bought you about 15 Rand (R15), which was just

below their minimum wage (this was roughly R20); a liter of milk was about R10, as was a loaf of bread. A beer at an average pub was between R20 and R40, and a meal at a fast food or budget chain restaurant would be between R80 and R150. Rent and overall cost of living were at least 50% cheaper than any big city, and this rate would be even more favorable for those receiving their income from a developed country while living in South Africa.

Unfortunately, they didn't welcome my input, interpreting my contributions as condescension typical of my ilk. They doubled down, emphasizing that there *was* a firm benchmark I would need to exceed. Not that the secretary in Washington planned to elucidate, of course. "Was there anything else you needed, or would that be all?"

Using these dealings thus far as a template, I foolishly inferred that their nonplussed uselessness which seemed so prevalent might be a kitschy form of laid-back hospitality as opposed to garden-variety bureaucratic lethargy. Or, even better, they'd recognized me as one of their own and, as a sign of respect, I was now being invited to haggle; by the sound of things, there appeared to be a good deal of wiggle room.

In any case, the next item on the docket was to provide evidence of a clean criminal record. Great. This should be one of the more easily obtainable documents: most organizations hiring in the US require applicants to submit to a state background check; those looking for jobs in the fields of education or caregiving or, in my experience, tennis coaching, will therefore have done this multiple times. Fortunately, you can walk into any police station or any number of local municipal agencies and pay a few dollars for them to take your fingerprints and run a cross-check on you. On the off chance you're seeking a slightly more high-stakes career involving international travel or government work (or, apparently, if you're hoping to study abroad), you'll have to do a background check of the *federal* variety. This process is mostly the same, but costs more and means your fingerprints

are run through the FBI's own, wider, database. For my convenience, the FBI's website tells me, they with hundreds of local fingerprinting stations across the country to provide these checks, for which the results are given via an encrypted online document.

Just in case, however, I check back in with my friends at the embassy where, thankfully, the secretary confirms my theory.

"Yes, whatever the site says is accurate. If it says we need an original copy of your background check, that's what we need."

"Great. Just wanted to make sure."

As a gesture of goodwill, I decide to go above and beyond, paying for both a state and federal check. I get my fingerprints taken at these two separate places, where I mention that I'll need an official paper copy of my results. Everyone there seems confused by my request.

"That's not something anyone's ever needed before. In fact, I'm not even sure if a company can legally require that. But I guess you could just print off a copy of the encrypted file the FBI sends you."

"Okay, thanks." I fail to register this harbinger and whizz through the rest of the checklist: I get a couple of passport photos taken and printed, get copies of my passport and birth certificate notarized, receive a physical exam from my doctor, buy travel insurance, and fill out a pile of other forms.

I notice on the embassy's site a memorandum announcing that they no longer allow applicants to send in their documents and passport along with a money order to pay for the embassy to send the passport back. Though only just having learned of its existence, I'm disappointed by the retirement of what would've been such a convenient option. All the same, I try to keep a positive outlook. I'd done the hard work, after all, and was now just a few hours' drive from freedom. I then see another memo further down the page informing us that the embassy also no longer allows applicants to make reservations for their visa appointments: First come, first served.

The website dictates the visa officer is on site from Monday to

Thursday from eight to eleven-thirty in the morning, at which point he breaks for lunch. This must be a long lunch: the site offers no indication he returns to the building that same day. As usual, I call ahead to verify this, adding that I'll be driving several hours to get there and, in the event of circumstances outside my control, would very much appreciate some flexibility were I to arrive a few minutes late. The receptionist has no time for my special pleading. She curtly restates the hours, adding that, even if, hypothetically, I was next in line at half-past eleven, I'd need to come back the next day. They're very busy with extremely important work in the afternoon, you see; if you wanted to see the visa-man, you ought to have arrived earlier.

This made the next day's drive, starting, as it needed to, before dawn, incredibly high-stakes. No doubt my reckless weaving towards the nation's capital looked suspicious - I'd be shocked if homeland security didn't flag me. Thankfully, I made good time and could drop back under the speed limit a few miles outside the capital beltway, which likely spared me from getting drone-struck.

With just under an hour before the agent would end his work-day, I found parking near embassy row and hurried towards the unsympathetic South Africans, sprinting past their three-meter-tall bronze Mandela before bursting into their front office out of breath. But none of the urgent productivity and heartless efficiency that I'd been warned of by the receptionist seemed evident. This was a sleepy waiting room, with a portly woman behind a glass window asking visitors to sign in on a clipboard. Only two other people had stopped by today. There was only one small side office, presumably where the visa interviews were being held. One other young man was in the waiting room with me and, as he recounted the saga of his preceding days, any self-pity I felt after having to drive three hours that morning disappeared.

He was from Nebraska and couldn't afford a plane ticket to visit the embassy (which, lest we forget, no longer accepted applications by mail) so had driven fourteen hours through the

night to get here yesterday morning, only to learn the three months'-worth of financial records he'd brought were insufficient. It had been decided that he needed proof of having a few-thousand dollars in savings over the past *six* months. He'd run out to his car to fetch his laptop, returning to show the visa officer some earlier records. But these wouldn't do, either.

"No, no, no. These need to be printed and notarized," said the officer. The young man quickly did an online search for the nearest notary, a ten-minute drive away. The agent pointed at the clock, which had just gone eleven.

"You won't get back here in time - I'm only here until eleven-thirty. No exceptions. Try again tomorrow."

Left with no other choice, the young man slept in his car around the corner from the embassy. By the time I arrived, he'd already been turned away *again*, having needed to run to the printing shop in order to get a faxed letter from his parents stating they would support him in a financial emergency. Luckily, he'd made it back in time. I wished him luck as he got called in. It worked: at the third time of asking, the Nebraskan succeeded in submitting his documents. He emerged, looking more relieved than triumphant. Either he'd genuinely met the requirements, or the visa officer had become bored of toying with him after seeing how disheartened the young man had become. After wishing me the best, he left to start his long drive home.

A muffled bark came from inside the office he'd vacated.

"Next."

I let myself in and sat down in front of the window. I confidently placed the stack of documents in the aluminum tray under the plexiglass, hoping the thickness of my portfolio gave it (and its owner) an air of legitimacy. Alas, like a police bloodhound capable of smelling blood traces even after any visible evidence has been scrubbed away, the dour, wiry little man immediately identified a weakness. Without looking at any of my other documents, he took out a page from somewhere in the middle of the stack. It was my background check. Rubbing the corner of the paper between

his thumb and index finger, he looked at me for the first time since I'd entered the room.

"This is the wrong paper, my friend."

"But my results are totally clean. I can even show you them on the FBI's website."

"Wrong paper."

"Alright, fine. But can you check the rest of my documents to make sure they're acceptable? That way we can at least make some progress while I'm here."

"No, I can only evaluate an application in its entirety."

I looked at my watch, and my stomach sank: eleven fifteen. I slunk back to my car, thwarted. I was up against an opponent more cunning than I could have ever predicted: the shadowy cabal of the South African consulate.





I'd been too naïve. What had I been expecting? I never had a chance of succeeding on my first attempt (and definitely not after I'd insulted his colleagues over the phone). Even if I'd brought the right background check, the man would have found fault in something else. But however arbitrary, my task had been set. I couldn't show my face again before I'd replaced the "Wrong Paper" with something more suitable.

The South African delegates, it turned out, had decided modern, paperless methods were not to be trusted, and preferred these results to be printed on a proprietary carbon paper. But, in my shell-shocked state, I'd forgotten to probe for more information before leaving.

You're on your own, kid. The plot thickens when you call any of the official FBI background check agencies and ask whether they sanction this specific paper stock. The consensus, to be sure, is *no*. (Technically, the first response is something closer to "I have no idea what you're talking about. Let me see if my manager or anyone else here has heard of that.") Hours of trawling through the internet also fails to provide evidence that any such stationery exists. The farce continues when you call any of the embassies or consulates to inform them of your findings and ask if you can submit your background check (spotless, by the way) to them as the original, online document - a method, you mention, the FBI *themselves* would prefer. But no, you learn. The only acceptable rap sheet is a rap sheet printed on a paper even the federal government has deemed obsolete. Paradoxically, the embassy trusts the *results*, but not the people who provide them; apparently, a paper copy provided by a third party is somehow preferable to a file received directly from the FBI's lab.

The receptionist in Washington does not seem to appreciate your suggestion that the only explanation for this stupid requirement is the embassy having a vested interest in pushing this dead paper stock, perhaps earning a commission for every client it can secure. The woman implies that I'm not treating their institution with sufficient respect, so I affect my most ingratiating voice.

“I apologize, ma’am. Could you please tell me where it’s possible to find a background check provider who will give me the results on your special paper?”

“We don’t have that information.”

Her ineptitude is echoed in calls to the consulates in New York and Chicago. The phone line for the consulate in Los Angeles rings for several minutes before cutting to a dial tone. If I didn’t know better, I’d assume these workers’ paychecks didn’t depend on helping people like me.

What could possibly have been the point? Was it some sort of rider? There was that urban legend of the band who demanded a bowl of brown M&M’s be present in the band’s changing room on-site. If the band saw that this had been met, it was an indication that the contract had been forensically perused, and they were likely in safe hands. Were the South Africans doing something similar, using their checklist to weed out all but the most devoted and obedient candidates?

In any case, I give up trying to reach the South Africans and start canvassing every background check agency within a 200-mile radius. After a few hours, I find one who might work with me.

“We aren’t really supposed to print on that stuff anymore - the FBI itself said it was less secure than just using its free online service. But let’s see what we can do.”

After an hour’s drive, I arrive at their address, an outbuilding in an industrial park. A guy taking a smoke break stands beside the entrance in front of one of the disabled parking spots. He wears a leather jacket and basketball shoes and has dark hair gelled into a mohawk. He hurriedly drops and stomps out his cigarette before buzzing me in, and it’s he who takes my fingerprints in the dingy, one-room office where faux-wood paneling covers the walls and old, stained drop ceiling tiles hang above a peeling linoleum floor. I’m back in the car after just a few minutes - the procedure was the same as each of the other occasions, and I’d now spent almost three hundred dollars, but, by the grace of god, the special, oily paper arrives in the mail in a couple of days.

Back at the embassy, the man behind the bullet-proof glass (his need for which I now understand) takes the stack of papers I hand him and skims through them for several seconds, uninterested. He then flips back to the beginning and slaps a staple into the top left corner before reaching for his rubber stamp which he presses first into the inkpad then briskly onto the packet's first page. All of this is done with a theatrical panache, an affect which continues as he spins his chair to a small table behind him and puts the application in one of the drawers.

"Your visa will be ready in five to ten business days," he says, pointing to the door behind me. In shock, I stand to leave. I thank him, but it seems he's already irritated by my lingering presence. He mumbles a response without looking up from the other assorted papers on his desk, which he's already begun to shuffle through. As soon as I've pulled the door ajar, he summons another victim from the waiting area.

"Next!"

I sat in the car thrilled, if slightly peeved. After all this trouble, *that's* how little any of this actually meant? At least let me know you're in on the joke, for God's sake. But never mind that now; we're South Africa-bound, baby.

15

FEES MUST FALL

Stellenbosch was about an hour's drive inland from Cape Town, nestled amid the surrounding Hottentot mountains which shield the town from the Cape winds, keeping it much warmer than the peninsula in the summer months. Though less precipitous than their cousins on the Cape, these mountains are no less captivating; at dusk, as if to release the heat collected during the day, their sandstone glows, radiating a rich, lavender-tinted sienna. Besides lending itself to a charming lethargy, the region's topography is ideal for viticulture: any arable land that isn't too steep to farm is covered by rolling vineyards. Despite this thriving industry, the village relies heavily on the university, which takes up most of the historic downtown area, creating jobs and attracting thousands of students who fill available housing and fund shops, restaurants, and the dozens of nearby wineries.

I was placed along with the other international students (most of whom had arrived in groups), in a cluster of small dormitory buildings on the edge of campus. Of my three roommates, two were American, as were three of the four girls who lived across the hall. In fact, most of the other students on our floor were from the States - it seemed as if there were four or five major study-abroad companies that bundled these students together and

shipped them overseas. I asked around, but I couldn't quite ascertain the benefits of traveling through this kind of outfit. They did, admittedly, offer a liaison officer for support in the countries they sent you to, and the overall process, the students told me, was very convenient; just submit a short online application and you were on your way. You hand over your usual tuition fees, and the travel company then takes their cut, helping you get your visa and enroll in your exchange school.

It was no wonder these companies made it so easy. The Americans who'd ceded control to these travel agencies were still paying the exorbitant sums demanded by their home schools: up to \$30,000 for the semester. For as much hassle as my application and visa process had been, by registering at Stellenbosch under my own volition I owed only the minimum student fees for the semester, about \$2,000. And, perhaps most regrettably, the others had missed out on the character-building experience of navigating the arcane world of obsolete paper-stock, a value you just can't quantify.

Alas, my righteousness ended there: any civic self-satisfaction I might have arrived with on my first trip was now past its sell-by date. Obama winning in 2008 allowed for almost a decade of laurel-resting and hearty self-congratulation by the media and most of the country. For democrats, his ascension was a silver bullet - he represented a miraculous opportunity to reverse centuries of damage without threatening the comfortable status quo. The crudeness of our two-party system had finally proved advantageous; there was no unsavory gray area, no nuance, no spectrum, no protracted comparisons of policy, just a binary choice: do you vote for racism, or against it? No further action required. Even those who'd bungled the first opportunity got a second chance when he ran for re-election. This was the type of absolution I knew so many would have killed for in South Africa. Unfortunately for me, the Donald was now in office, and there was nowhere to hide. Even our trusty Alamo (to wit: blaming the electoral college) had been sacked: Pennsylvania had gone *red* for

the first time in several decades, so I couldn't even deflect blame: "We did our job, blame Ohio!"



While the Americans seemed remarkably unvexed by their extortionate education system, our arrival had coincided with South African students having reached a boiling point with their own. Tuition costs here, though seemingly affordable for students like us from developed nations, were prohibitive for millions of the country's own young adults, and especially so for those of color. Over the past couple of years, nationwide protests (under a broad umbrella of "Fees Must Fall") had been held in cities and on campuses. Initially, demands were for reduced fees across the board and increased bursaries for those in need. Soon, though, their scope soon increased, and there was soon a clamoring for schools to disavow and distance themselves both ideologically and materially from the country's segregated past.

The trouble is that the country has only been democratic and racially integrated for a sliver of its modern history: most of its universities and public infrastructure were built (not built *literally* - obviously - but *founded*) and sponsored for decades by white politicians and other elites, all of whom had some vested interest in maintaining imperial supremacy. Today, of course, certain practices are easily identified and redressed: slap together some new world maps with Africa in the center (instead of the US or Britain), postpone all Pencil Tests and eugenics experiments until further notice, and you're on your way. But eventually the lines blur, and it becomes difficult to parse contributing factors when the desired result is a binary value judgment of an individual (and their societal impact).

One example of this during my time there was the controversy surrounding the Rhodes Scholarship, an endowment of immense prestige that has given thousands of non-white students a platform to become hugely influential in the sciences, public service,

and the arts. Of course, the program's eponymous honorary South African dabbled in other passion projects, too: namely, the advancement of white imperial interests. In fairness, he had a real knack for it, even managing to get an entire African country named after himself; the holy grail, in those days. As Western culture attempts to raise its collective moral standards by punishing those who have abused their power and seeking restitution for those who have been wronged, a dilemma rears its head: anyone who has had an undeniable, positive impact on many others (who are either unsympathetic or unaware of the subject's more nefarious interests) will be difficult to displace from the cultural canon.

Admittedly, I wasn't totally up to speed on South Africa's dignitaries of yore, but I assumed the gist was the same as the similar incidents I'd heard about in the US: invariably, it comes to light that the storied politician or military hero in question actually ran a plantation with thousands of enslaved people and was known for being a heartless, violent adulterer and thief. Following these revelations, it's politely suggested that perhaps there shouldn't be a statue in his honor in the center of town. It's at this point, invariably, that the country's self-appointed Heritage Protectors and Devil's Advocates come out of the woodwork to inform us that, *actually*, since the man was just a product of his time, we oughtn't hold him accountable to today's sensibilities. The world has changed, and the ways in which we live, work, and play would have been inconceivable to such a man - he was just trying his best, like everyone else, while conforming to the norms of the day.

Things get a little more tenuous when these history buffs go on to argue that those dopey old parochial slave traders would nevertheless have somehow not only had the incredible foresight to conceive of heavy automatic assault rifles, but the wisdom to completely support the citizen's right to drive around with one in the bed of their truck. I'd long since lost faith that there was a nuanced, coherent narrative; per capita, I had seen more confed-

erate flag bumper stickers north of the Mason-Dixon (it always tickled me that, usually, at least one of the sticker or the car were brand new) than I had while living in the supposedly more conservative Florida. It seemed that these flags had become more of a team logo: it was a safe bet that a blind date between two fans of the bygone confederacy would find them agreeing on most sociopolitical issues. Of course, the flag was not alone as a display of fandom: one man, the father of a girl I had dated in high school, wanting to simultaneously prove his patriotism, satiate his craving for tomato condiments, and avoid aiding John Kerry's 2004 campaign against George W. at any cost, swore to never again consume a drop of Heinz ketchup or any other of the brand's products. If you're having trouble connecting the dots on this bizarre pledge of fealty, Kerry's wife was the daughter of the condiment magnate. When I met the man almost 10 years after this election, he was still keeping his promise, shipping in "George Washington" brand ketchup from a small outfit across the country at \$20 a bottle (plus shipping and handling).

So dominant is our two-party duopoly that its constituent blocs are forced to be increasingly polarized over time. This rift is, by design, more an emotional one than anything else; the two parties share too many mutual interests to risk any meaningful policy differences. Nevertheless, as this cultural divide yawns, there becomes no greater cause for shame than to be suspected of sympathizing with any of the other team's positions.

By contrast, South Africa's system of proportional representation interested me, as it seemed to engender a more varied range of ideologies. The most left leaning party in the US is, in effect, the Democratic Party, which would be considered center- or right-leaning in most other developed nations. Fringe parties are shouted down by virtue of the first-past the-post system, stunting their potential. South Africa had several parties with genuine clout, each with their own distinct objectives, including economic reform, land restitution, Pan-African unity. Most of these parties

agreed that South Africa needed to liberate itself from the coercive influences of the outside, Western world.

But this sentiment was not exclusive to the left-wingers. Stellenbosch, along with many other heavily Afrikaans regions in the country, had its own qualms about imperial omnipresence, if from a slightly different angle: The Afrikaners took issue with the country's educational institutions and economy now conducting operations mostly in English, as this meant the diminished presence and influence of their own language and culture.

For now, though - in Stellenbosch, at least - it seemed that Rhodes and his contemporaries had not yet been forgotten. And, based on my experiences in the handful of heavily-trafficked bars and clubs scattered around campus (which, like many of the university's buildings, had Afrikaans names), the Afrikaans language sounded alive and well, too. It's similar to real Dutch, thanks to the original colonizers, but has gathered enough distinct differences after a couple of hundred years on its own that it's now an officially distinct language, or so I'm told. I speak neither, a fact which I did my best to make publicly available but in fact did little to stop me getting harangued, on various occasions, by drunk Willems, Pieters, and Johans, respectively. The Afrikaans culture was under siege, it turned out - from all angles. Little old me thus represented a clear and present danger.

This was made particularly clear to me at one nightclub which was favored by the international students but I found far too intimidating; I only suffered through a couple of visits before I swore to never return. Its second floor, which we had to venture through to reach the bar area, was reserved strictly for Boer folk rock and corresponding dance, called *sokkie*. Already chilling enough, I know, but it was made more so given that this room shared a lighting theme with the electronic and hip-hop floors: flickering strobe lights roamed over eerie phosphorescent symbols and paintings glowing from the black walls and ceiling. This was disorienting, concealing the exit and scuppering any hopes of a quick escape.

During our ill-fated forays through this milieu, the rambunctious young agrarians took the opportunity to berate me while they waited in line or scouted a girl to proposition. I tried the usual peacemaking techniques, namely flattery, complimenting their camo dungarees or farming wellies. My inquisitors, however, remained indignant. As participation in their choreographed dancing seemed mandatory, I assumed they were annoyed at my smug abstention. I would have joined in, but it looked like a cross between an organized square dance and a traditional big-band swing - disciplines in which I had no prior experience.

Fortunately, one of these grillings occurred while I was standing with one of my classmates, who spoke Dutch and could thus give a rough translation of their complaints: apparently, I looked or sounded to them like an “Englishman.” I had a feeling it wasn’t the time to explain that actually, mein *viend*, I was only *half* English, on my mother’s side, and had in fact grown up in the US. But even this would not have sufficed; for many Afrikaners, even other white South Africans are suspect. Historically, these families had British lineage, so the pejorative connotation remains. Coincidentally, similar terminology was used back in Pennsylvania, where the Amish used the term *English* to refer to anyone outside of their community.

In fact, the groups seemed kindred spirits: two small farming colonies who, despite maintaining little loyalty to their country of origin, still clung to a unique, if slightly crude, variant of their native language. Kind of endearing, if you discount the white nationalism and inbreeding. Regardless, I now better understood their distress: if they didn’t like the look of *me*, there was no chance they trusted *anyone*, which must have been exhausting. I held onto a sliver of hope that their disdain was rooted in pan-African, anti-imperialist solidarity, but this was extinguished a week later when I saw a small group of black students get turned away from the bar we were in line for. While the bouncer checked our group’s IDs, one of the girls asked him why the other group hadn’t been allowed inside.

“We didn’t want them to get into any trouble.”

Well, I thought, *at least I had the privilege of being trapped in the epileptic-fit zone spittle while getting sprayed into my ear by a bleating skinhead* - those below me on the pecking order weren’t even allowed in.

I recognized the bouncer’s phrasing as the sort of melodramatic passive-voice a couple of goodfellas might use to talk about how much of a shame it would be if the owner of the massage parlor they were leaning on was found sleeping with the fishes. Like he was actually looking out for the guys he turned away. The incident was made slightly more confusing, however, given that the man was black. He didn’t seem bothered; in his defense, the directive had clearly been passed down from above. After a few of our probing questions, he explained his employer had wanted to increase security in response to the crime wave the town had suffered over the last few months; for as peaceful as Stellenbosch seemed, it was not without its share of gruesome tragedy. Mirroring my arrival a few years earlier (whereupon I’d been notified there’d been a break-in and attempted stabbing just a few days only once I’d arrived), a revelation had come to light just a few hours after arriving on campus. A female Afrikaans student had been kidnapped by a group of men just a couple of weeks before. The girl had given her friend a ride home to his apartment just beyond campus, on a road bordering the nearby township. As she parked the car, a group of men had carjacked and kidnapped them, beating the girl’s friend nearly to death before raping and killing her. During their trial, the stone the killers used to crush her head could only be carried into the courtroom by two large security guards. This incident did little to allay the Afrikaners’ concerns. Naturally, distress over the waning influence of Afrikaans garnered little sympathy from the black population, who argued the language of apartheid, having been weaponized and used to alienate for so long, *ought* to be relegated.

Things are complicated by the country’s multilingualism not being delineated perfectly along racial lines: most of the colored

population speaks Afrikaans as a first language, for example, but a large percentage also speaks English. Among the black population, meanwhile, the confluence of tribal and ethnic groups means there are more than two dozen unique dialects. Though epitomizing the country's fantastic diversity, there being eleven official spoken languages is not conducive to large-scale standardized education, a prerequisite for keeping pace with the ever-advancing Western world. In the wake of decades of cultural erasure, the newly democratic government offered linguistic representation through the national anthem, ingeniously incorporating the country's five most-used languages which include, of course, some that require clicks, glottals, and other guttural sounds.

16

NEWLANDS

(OLD-HABITS)

By the time I saw the anthem attempted in person, however, it had been fully memorized, and the crowd's rendition was magnificent. A classmate had offered me a spare ticket to see the Springboks, the national rugby team, who were up against the All Blacks of New Zealand. This was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. The visiting team was a perennial sporting powerhouse and a globally recognized brand of its own, but the rivalry between the teams had its own historical significance: the Springboks had beaten the All Blacks to win the Rugby World Cup in 1995, a tournament hosted by the freshly democratized South Africa with its new president, Nelson Mandela, watching on. Fortunately for the team in 1995, which was still mostly white, the new anthem had not yet been ratified - they still had a few more years to learn Zulu and Xhosa parts by heart.

The All Blacks had their own, more visceral display of fraternity: the Haka, a profoundly intimidating Māori dance. The stadium, packed to the rafters with 50,000 rowdy fans, fell into a reverential silence as the visiting team convened at midfield and assembled in triangular formation to begin their pre-battle ritual. We watched on, transfixed. I was starstruck not by the specific players (who, I'm ashamed to confess, I'd never heard of), but by

the legendary dance itself, which had fascinated me since I was a child; my dad had visited the islands when I was five or six, returning with a small paper booklet for me that I'd studied and carried around for weeks. Reading about this from Amish country, these terrifying, hypertrophic men and their ritual had seemed impossibly exotic. Its dozen or so pages detailed the history and the steps of the legendary dance, which featured lots of synchronized stomping, chanting, and grotesque, gargoyle faces from the participants, all while staring menacingly into the eyes of their opposition. To see these massive, brutish men display such unashamed devotion to this choreography was incongruous; I had seen athletes sing their anthems or even celebrate scoring a goal or touchdown with a silly dance they'd planned with a few of their teammates, but this was far more intimate. Though my friends and I were standing at the far end of the stadium, we could hear the dancers' chants and cries, their appeals to the heavens for good fortune. We could even hear their rhythmic, thundering stomps, which was unsurprising; the thighs powering these were thicker than my torso. Although the ritual seems somewhat unjust (after all, only one team gets a sanctioned opportunity to frighten the other), it's considered a sign of respect if the dance is performed for your team, and it was clear both groups relished their roles. The opponents (the Springboks, in this case) watch on, arm in arm, a few meters away, trying to look as unperturbed as possible as they hold the gaze of the screaming men before them. Upon completion of the ceremony, a deafening roar erupts: Springbok fans praising their team's steadfast defiance, the others claiming the All Blacks successfully having struck fear into their enemies. Curiously, this latter group seemed well represented. This had been particularly evident earlier that afternoon while we'd been wandering around, enjoying the pre-match ambience.

Newlands, the rugby stadium, was the oldest in the country and, not incidentally, was in one of the posh, quiet neighborhoods outside Cape Town, tucked beneath the mountain alongside the university and surrounded by private prep schools. Here,

where the eastern side of the mountains does not yet directly border the ocean (unlike Camp's Bay on the west), you're more protected from the sun and wind and, luckily for me, their drying properties: I noticed remarkably few clouds of nosebleed-inducing dirt floating around as I explored these neighborhoods, which are markedly more lush and verdant than their counterparts in the poorer areas. On a match day for the rugby (or the cricket, whose own oval is next door), large beer gardens and marquees were set up in the wooded clearings between the stadium and the wooded nature trail that ran past, accompanying a meandering stream (a short, scenic walk southwards alongside which brings you to the national botanical garden). Vendors lined this path and the residential streets nearby to sell hot dogs, snacks, and memorabilia; jerseys, flags, and hats for both teams were on display. For what it was worth, I noticed that, here, no vuvuzelas were available - or even audible. I heard a few Kiwi accents, but most of the fans sporting All Black gear were South African - and most of them were colored or black. There were thousands of supporters, easily as many as for the Springboks. I assumed this was partly due to the hegemonic success of the All Blacks: dominant teams easily garner an international fanbase. On a given weekend during the Premier League season, for example, bars were packed with locals in Manchester United, Arsenal, and Chelsea shirts. United's fanbase, in my anecdotal experience, seemed strongest, which made sense. The team had leapt out to a huge head start in the early 1990s, taking advantage of the television-rights boom coinciding with its on-field success. They leveraged this perfectly, becoming the most popular team in Africa - more so, even, than any local club teams - by playing exhibition matches and licensing their image rights to African-based companies who could then mass-produce jerseys and merchandise, enabling the team to gain a foothold long before the competition. In subsequent years, teams like Arsenal, Chelsea, and Liverpool were able to gain some ground by dethroning Manchester United on the field but also by fielding superstar African players like

Didier Drogba (Ivory Coast), Mohamed Salah (Egypt), and Thierry Henry (France, but he was black, which, according to multiple taxi drivers and more than a few locals, was good enough). But, to my knowledge, the All Blacks had funded no such marketing campaign. Their storied history, I felt, still didn't quite account for the scale of the support.

As I waited in line for a beer at halftime, I asked around and got a more plausible explanation. Mandela's reconciliatory efforts (keeping the logo, and so on) were, for many, too late; during apartheid, a significant percentage of non-white rugby fans in South Africa had switched their allegiance, irreversibly, to the All Blacks, whose team, government, and supporters were far more amenable to societal integration and were outspoken against the South African regime. Although the Springboks and other local teams throughout the country were now integrated and thus were no longer tantamount to ringing endorsements of a racist regime as they had been during the preceding decades, a lasting stigma was unavoidable. Rugby having been such a cherished and fiercely protected way of life for so much of the [conservative and Afrikaans] population meant that it remained inextricably linked, by reputation, to those groups historically reluctant to cede ground to progressive values (or even external influence).

This stubborn resistance was especially palpable back in a provincial town like Stellenbosch, a rugby hotbed with a 16,000-seat stadium of its own, whose geographic seclusion and historically protected infrastructure implicitly encouraged a certain romanticized traditionalism. In the soft haze of the valley, my supposition was that as long as the rugby team kept playing and the drinks kept flowing, momentum for drastic change would be difficult to accumulate.

17

COSA NOSTRA

(OU, SI TU PREFERE, "NOTRE CHOSE")

I found myself navigating a blind nationalism from some of the visiting students, too. A university from Paris had sent over two dozen undergraduates. Figuring that they represented my most realistic chance of making international friends during my trip, I spent most of the first few weeks with them, joining them on day trips into the city and other local excursions. They all claimed to have intentionally signed up to come to an English-speaking country for language immersion. Nevertheless, I took care to speak slowly and enunciate clearly, and even encouraged those with a more beginner grasp to practice with me whenever they wanted. But it seemed the novelty, for them, at least, was short-lived: with increasing regularity, they reverted to their first language. This was, I'm completely aware, their prerogative. But I put it to you that also included in your natural rights are the freedom to pass wind or to refuse to bathe. Unfortunately, the bar for what is (or isn't) conducive to social cohesion is an entirely separate one to what is (or isn't) technically immoral. Whether our cultural values are flawed or not is a discussion for a different time. At any rate, there was nothing we could do or say about it, but their rudeness was particularly annoying in situations where they'd agreed to spend time with us English speakers beforehand.

One day, hoping to encourage the groups to mingle, I'd organized a beach trip with some of the French and a few of the American girls across the hall. The girls filled one of the two taxis we'd called, so I offered to ride with the French in the other. As I approached the car, one of the guys, whose English was almost fluent, said (with sincerity), "Jack, it would be best if you sit in the front. We want to speak with each other in *our* language back here." The rest of the afternoon continued along this trajectory.

This was conflicting. Could I be critical of people speaking their own language? Worse, my frustration was not without a tinge of envy. Even the worst English-speaker among them was closer to being bilingual than I was. Not that it was a fair fight, I should add: almost all of the French had attended private schools where English was required, and even the others had still spoken a second language intensively from quite a young age, an advantage we didn't have in much of back home. Despite the US having no official language, a perfunctory nod to its multicultural roots, there existed a general disdain for "outside" cultures. So, after a few months of ego-destroying social exclusion and failed attempts at self-teaching, I couldn't help wallowing in the disappointment that I hadn't gained a proficiency when it would have come so easily.

Despite my own shortcomings, I couldn't find it within myself to completely absolve the French, whose efforts to cooperate were so brazenly half-assed. I knew how often they feigned implacable bewilderment to escape any conversations that bored them (spoiler: very often), or began sending messages about us into their group chat; naturally, they had titled The French Mafia. As it happened, the only topics in English which reliably held their interest were critiques of the US. How peculiar. They had resorted to this after their initial interrogation of me and my roommates had elicited that none of us had voted for Trump (an outcome I suspected the French would have reveled in - and likely preferred). It became difficult not to take this personally; I can only be reminded so many times, apropos of nothing, that

“Americans are fat.” Didn’t they know the golden rule of travel? You’re only allowed to criticize your own country - or so I’ve heard; in the US, constructive criticism is invariably met with, “If you hate it so much, pack your bags and leave.”

But not all generalizations, I’ve realized, are unwelcome. If they’re complimentary, you’re likely in the clear. We pick and choose what we (and our home countries) ought to be associated with. I remembered what Andy Murray, the tennis player, had said about being labeled Scottish (his country of birth) by England’s media when he played well, but claimed by them as British (still technically true, but, conveniently, a much wider umbrella) when he won.

If someone tells me they love America after visiting some state in the Midwest and enjoying its food or its people, I’m happy to steal the credit and accept the compliment on behalf of the town whether or not I’ve heard of it. If, however, they say they visited America and now hate it, I’m quick to tell them that whichever state or city they visited is a dump and that they ought to explore a good one next time.

Things get particularly delicate when it comes to low-hanging fruit. However easily satirized a place’s goings-on are, the more sensitive those who are forced to live through it are to outside comment. An observation being objectively true is no guarantee that it will be well received - if anything, the opposite. It’s natural to be less receptive to criticism than praise and, obviously, certain historically disenfranchised groups are well within their rights to be more sensitive to criticism. The bad news - and this goes for all of us - is that insights from outsiders are sometimes astute. Of course, it certainly isn’t the case that all commentary is worth engaging with.

One night, one of the Parisian guys brought up fashion. His people, he pointed out, were miles ahead of the US in this field and had set a precedent we could only crudely imitate, much to their amusement. I pointed to his footwear.

“But you’re wearing boat shoes.”

“Yes, designed in France. An iconic style.”

I could feel the red mist descending. I had too many years of experience to let them get away with spreading fake news; they had no idea who they were dealing with. I’d worked at dozens of racket and country clubs and had also been to hundreds of disgusting frats and house parties over the years. Dubious aesthetic value, boat shoes were incontrovertibly a wardrobe staple for any white guy above the poverty line. Any self-respecting backwards-baseball-capped frat guy wouldn’t leave the house without them, ad absurdum: I’d played intramural basketball with one such guy just before I left for my exchange. He played for hours - not too badly, by the way - wearing Sperry topsiders with no socks. The tan leather was soaked dark with sweat, and the smell, as you can imagine, was putrid. He didn’t get blisters, however; he explained to us afterwards that this was his usual protocol for basketball - he’d long since abandoned sneakers and had built up bulletproof callouses. Sitting before the French contrarians, I thought back to that frat brother, that American hero. This was stolen valor. The buck stopped here - it had to. I played it cool, which took all my restraint:

“Just so you know, *mon frere*, boat shoes are American.”

Of course, the boys were incredulous, and hurriedly whipped out their phones to consult the web. After a few minutes of panicked scrolling, they realized the facts didn’t care about their feelings. *L’Americain* was right. They fell into a disappointed sulk, and the evening petered out. But this was more than fine by me; I’d defended my country’s honor. You don’t have to like us, but you *will* respect us. It did seem I’d earned us a *détente*: following the shoe discussion, the French toned down their smug rudeness, at least in our presence.

This was about as adversarial as things got on the social scene. For the most part, it seemed like everyone had mellowed out compared to the lustful extremes I’d witnessed during my volunteering stint, albeit there were a few notable exceptions. Exchanges like this proved to be hugely emotionally taxing for couples. Any

prolonged separation is difficult, but there seemed to be an additional pressure (however difficult it may be to sympathize with) on the travelers, too, who needed to live up to the expectations of such a “life-changing” trip. In turn, this precipitated an undercurrent of jealousy for those they’d been left behind to suffer through the doldrums of mundane life all the while knowing their partner was (ostensibly) enjoying a formative adventure. Social media, as it is wont to do, ensured the poor folks back home had salt rubbed in this wound relentlessly.

After our final exams, the French drove north into the Namibian desert to a region called the Sossusvlei, home to famously large (over 300 meters!) sand dunes. I was invited, but the expedition would have required being trapped with six of them in an all-terrain truck for twelve hours straight... twice. I opted instead to join a few of the American guys along the Garden Route. They wanted to hit the usual tourist stops, but had also been invited to an end of year party in Mossel Bay; one of them had a family friend with a small holiday home there, and my roommate Sean and I had weaseled our way onto the guest list. With summer approaching, the weather was getting warmer, and we thought it would be nice to be near the water. Not that we were planning to swim; the bay was grimy and industrial, not good for much beyond shark diving, which we’d booked for the next morning. I agreed to go through with the dive, but decided to leave my camera back on land. This proved wise. This time, a different shark (her head much wider than the original) emulated that terrifying approach I’d rewatched hundreds of times, surging out of the depths and slamming into our cage. Without the distraction of my camera, I could see the attack coming and dodged it easily. Unfortunately for the poor animal, however, she not only missed the bait but chomped into the chicken wire at such an angle that she couldn’t dislodge herself. For two interminable minutes, we were trapped inside the cage with the shark’s head as she desperately tried to thrash herself free. At long last, the crew managed to lift the roof and help us scramble out of the

cage. We then watched on as the captain sat on the edge of the boat and tried to pry the shark free by pressing his foot against her nose. I could only feel sympathetic: she hadn't meant to crash into us and was clearly panicking as she slowly drowned. Finally, after several minutes of putting his full weight into the effort, the captain broke her free. She slipped away, exhausted (and a few teeth lighter) but alive.

I had no desire to push my luck further. As soon as we were back on land, I drove home towards the university, leaving the others to continue their road trip without me.

18

ROCKING THE DAISIES

A few weeks later, the American girls roped me into joining them for a music festival a couple of hours north. Music festivals are not events I frequent (as you'd probably guess). But I knew a couple of the performing artists (however vaguely) and the tickets were cheap - compared to similar festivals in the US, at least - so I let myself be dragged along, on the conditions that we took two cars in case I wanted to escape, and that I didn't have to arrive until Friday - I refused to go for all three nights.

The drive north was stunning. Well, technically, this first outbound leg was westward: the girls had been wanting to do a game drive of their own, and weren't sure if they'd get a chance to do the Garden Route. They found a reserve an hour or so further inland than Stellenbosch. It was out of our way, but since renting a car was a hassle it was better to knock out a few activities at once.

If the mountains closer to the cape were noteworthy for their horizontal stratification, visibly layered as if to emphasize their eternity, to illustrate their steadfast passage through the eons, the rock formations *here* celebrated - indeed *insisted* upon - their noncompliance, seeming to contest the inevitability of time and erosion. These angular formations burst forth from beneath the

farmlands at strange angles. Time need not be married solely to erosion and decay. Pure, spontaneous creation, however imperfect, however chaotic, can happen too.

Sir Lowry's Pass prepares you for what's beyond by celebrating what's behind, the Huguenot Tunnel does the opposite: forget the past; forget what you thought you knew. It lasts for several minutes, boring through the Du Toitskloof Mountains. There is an old pass available, in the mold of Sir Lowry's, though the new tunnel is quicker and safer - especially on a day like this one, when the roads were wet. What results is several minutes of sensory deprivation, making the eventual exposition that much more breathtaking. The mountainous cauldron would be more than impressive enough on its own merit, without the help of a melodramatic reveal, of course. It's these mountains that give way to the massive, angular chunks of rock that puncture through the farmland, a graveyard of abortive fragments of accorded crust through which the road navigates. Here, the "fold" portion of these mountains' official name [the Cape Fold Belt] becomes easier to conceptualize; like the mountains further south, these formations, too, are layered, but at any angle to the earth *but* horizontal.

The sense of being in a primeval melting pot, a cauldron of geologic and atmospheric experimentation was heightened by the weather: though it was morning, the sky was a leaden gray, with billowing, lead-gray cumuli had rolled in, casting the landscape into foreboding shadow; nevertheless, the air carried an unmistakable pre-storm charge. These lands were at once a geological graveyard of destruction and decay, and a laboratory for spontaneous experimentation, transmogrification, raw creation. The intermittent lightning strikes we'd seen in the distance were soon accompanied by rain. We were alerted of this by the game reserve, who called to tell us the downpour had damaged one of the elephant enclosures, and that morning's game drive had been postponed to the afternoon. The girls decided they'd rather call it off and head to the festival so that we didn't have to drive at night.

The festival, held each spring, is called Rocking the Daisies, as in theory the surrounding rolling hillsides should be in bloom. For a few weeks each spring, the country's wildflowers produce a magnificent spectacle, with acres of polychromatic carpet covering the rolling grasslands, particularly along the coast.

But they weren't in bloom. Not here, at least. The gentle, bucolic landscape was still pretty - but nothing you wouldn't find back in Lancaster County; throw a stone - literally - and you'd hit some version of a cornfield or pasture. Thankfully, even the most mundane vistas in Africa are, by default, exotic, and thus justify themselves.

We were, it seemed, one of the only groups who arrived late. The parking lot, a mown field adjacent to the festival grounds, was already filled with thousands of cars; we had to hump our gear almost a mile to the entrance gates. Even the short queue we eventually found ended up taking almost an hour; a security team thoroughly rifled through every last backpack, duffel, and sleeping bag. This was, ostensibly, a safety precaution; they didn't want anyone bringing in glass bottles that might be thrown or broken. Coincidentally, there was supply to meet this newly-created demand: *safe* alcoholic beverages (served in plastic cups and aluminum cans) were provided (at exorbitant prices) by the festival's sponsors.

After we'd been all but cavity searched, we were waved through and given a map of the grounds. It looked like there was a main, central stage, and a handful of smaller ones scattered around it. There would, the brochure proudly informed us, be performances on one stage or another straight through to Sunday afternoon, allowing us to "rock round the clock." Interspersed in the music zone were clusters of food and drink trucks, and other social and lounge areas; during the day, these would host group activities; yoga, art, carnival games, and so on.

One of the workers at the entrance looked at our tickets and circled where we could go to set up our tents. There was, apparently, a bit of space left in Zone G. We made our way around the

perimeter of the grounds to the general admission campsite. It looked, if I had to approximate, like a post-natural disaster FEMA camp. Ten-meter-high flags were dotted throughout to mark the dozen or so different zones. This was a joyless, hopeless place; all we were missing were a few pairs of blue-helmeted UN Peacekeeping troops patrolling the perimeter.

Sleeping outdoors isn't something I pine for even when prospective conditions are ideal; here, we'd be surrounded on all sides by other tents, with only a meter-wide access path leading to the stage area a hundred meters or so away. There had been glamping options; larger, heated tents with ensuite bathrooms and warm showers, but these had long ago sold out. All that was left to reserve were patches of grass - it was up to us to bring tents, sleeping bags, and other supplies. The nearest town was a half hour's drive away, so retreating to a hotel or bed and breakfast was out of the question if I wanted to have a drink or two.

If we thought we were arriving before the party really got going, we were immediately proved mistaken. We shuffled, fresh-faced and naive, towards the back of our zone; harried, brusque workers in neon shirts manned the site at various points to guide the lost and weary. It felt as if we were scabs, replacing shell-shocked, trench-footed soldiers who'd been holding the line for weeks.

There was a large first aid tent, one of several, according to the map, between our zone and the next. We couldn't see inside, but streams of worried-looking workers and medics came in and out. A line of hopeful non-emergency casualties waited outside, somewhere between doubled-over and face down in the grass.

"Move. Move! Coming through!" We were shouldered out of the way by a worker who was making way for two of his colleagues, who were carrying a stretcher upon which a catatonic girl laid, wearing nothing but a bikini and hiking boots. Inevitably, we stopped and stared, hoping for a sign of life. Thankfully, we got one: she turned her head slightly and made a

face of discomfort. She then belched out a few pints of vomit, soaking her pigtails. Our Zone G worker then saw us.

“She’ll be fine. Just a bit of alcohol poisoning.”

The faces we passed on the way to our tent were varying degrees and permutations of haunted, jaded, sallow, and gaunt. This made me feel all the more ashamed: as we’d waited in line outside, I’d let the girls adorn my cheeks (thankfully, this spared my blushes, literally) and forehead with glitter, which they’d applied by mixing it into Vaseline to make sure it would stick. It was also waterproof, not that this would come into play: rain wasn’t in the forecast, and there was no hope of a shower; for those not glamping, the long weekend’s worth of accumulated grime and musk was to be regarded as almost a badge of honor - or so I was informed by the girls, who did this sort of thing (both the festival and the glitter-application) regularly.

I found the romanticization of “slumming it” ironic. A vast majority of the festival attendees were white; tickets for four-day access were a couple hundred dollars - food and drink not included. The appeal of such an event went beyond the music - after all, there were only one or two headline acts that were household names. This was a chance for us to roll around in the dirt and disavow hygiene with no social consequences, in the full knowledge that we had the safety net of paid staff on hand to rescue us if things got out of hand. We’d driven out into the remote farmland to set up our own little township and live, for just a few hours, in squalor, just like the people whose settlements we gawked at back near the city. Here, we were not disgusting, antisocial, and regressive, but liberated, artistic, and humble. The best theory I have is that it was the Proteus Effect: not only does your costume affect the way other people regard and respond to you, it affects how *you* think and behave. This contrived bubble upon which we partygoers had converged was, in a sense, a virtual world, where normal standards of hygiene and propriety were proudly inverted or discarded. Here, grunge and recklessness

became glamorous, a spectacle in their own right. Oh, well. When in Rome. I could last a couple of days, right?

Nope. The next morning, after being woken up at three in the morning by the thumping bass from the nearby hardcore techno stage - I'd brought earplugs to block the sound, so this wasn't what did it. It was actually the vibrations of the frozen, rock hard ground: evidently, my cheap air mattress had sprung a leak, and had been imperceptibly deflating since we set up the day before. At daybreak, I took the smaller of the two cars and skedaddled.

19

PIPE BOMB

Instead of going straight home, I decided to swing by the Postberg (pron. Potberg) national park on the west coast, as it was supposedly the Mecca for wildflower pilgrims. The music festival was slightly more inland - perhaps those flowers were waiting until these ones at the flagship branch gave them the green light. As I waited in the queue of other cars on the access road outside, my excitement grew - it was surely a good sign the attraction was in such demand. Once I paid my \$20 and they waved me through, however, I realized my celebrations had been premature. Though certainly charming, the gentle hills of grass overlooking the ocean were in fact just a normal (though admittedly a healthy) green. Somewhat disappointing, given my expectations. As I crested each hill and swept down into each meadow, I expected the treasure trove to finally reveal itself, a dense carpet of flowers transforming the hills into a gleaming horde of gold in the sunlight. But alas, a smattering of daisies provided the only variation (and not even real color: they were white, which doesn't even count).

The terrain here was similar to the peninsula, with scatterings of boulders and rocks throughout. On the steeper hills, like those which bordered so many of Cape Town's beaches, larger rocks have tumbled down (don't worry; this was millennia ago), congre-

gating on the shores to join the sunbathers - or, on one beach, *penguins*, a colony of whom have claimed a particularly rocky inlet along the peninsula called, creatively, Boulders Beach. The eponymous boulders, in the ribbon-cutters' defense, got there first; the knee-high birds that waddle around on the rocks and sand, and burrow into the wooded undergrowth nearby only showed up in the 1980s.

But on the flatter surfaces these rock formations is a more curious sight - and an especially incongruous one at altitude - where paved roads must find the paths of least resistance as they navigate the geologic handiwork of ancient glaciers. Hundreds of feet above sea-level, stretches of road wind through acres of dry grasses interspersed with chunks of light gray rock, several inches in diameter to several meters. The smaller ones are often spiked, less refined, more volcanic looking, while the larger ones are smooth but rarely perfectly spherical, sitting (or standing) oblong or baguette-shaped. Rocks of all sizes are seen stacked on top of each other, not necessarily ascending by decreasing volume, balancing with impossible poise in the face of the Cape's unrelenting elements.

After I'd snaked along for about an hour, I passed a small parking lot with a gazebo and some wooden picnic tables next to a beach access path. I'd packed a lunch, and this seemed like the perfect spot to rest for a few minutes before I began my drive home. I sat and started to unpack my food, enjoying the breeze coming in off the Atlantic.

It was a cool, blustery spring day, so I was thankful there was a warm drink to hand: I'd brought a handful of teabags, filled the thermos from the kettle, and even remembered to fill the little extra compartment with milk. You'll imagine how proud I was of my foresight, having grabbed the bottle for a few dollars from a grocery store just before setting off. I came to regret skimping on costs, however, when what emerged from the thermos was not only the water I'd boiled but a molten slurry of shattered glass. In bouncing over the speed bumps placed along the park's road, the

impact must have caused the cheap vacuum to implode. Heartbreaking. There was no salvaging the situation, the shards were too tiny; they'd shred my esophagus if I took even a sip. I noticed a few budding flowers running to my left and continuing out of sight behind a pair of boulders. After carefully resealing my newfangled pipe bomb, I ventured over to where (I prayed) the park's only colorful flowers had hidden themselves. At this point, even just a few dozen would be enough to salvage something from the day. Sure enough, a small cache of orange and red flowers had sprouted behind the rocks. (A triumph, all things considered.)



Wanting to stretch my legs before getting back in the car, I decided to walk along the shoreline which stretched for miles southwards towards Cape Town. Wanting to enjoy the feel of the sand, I left my socks and shoes by the flowers (risky business in South Africa, but I was confident nobody was around to make off with them) but as I started walking I realized I had erred; the sea foam was a sickly, synthetic green, and the seaweed heaps I'd noticed from back at the rocks were actually comprised mostly of gangrenous flotsam. The breeze, once brisk and refreshing, was now lethargic and had turned slightly rancid as it filtered over and through the mounds of debris and rotting kelp. At random, I picked one of the dark lumps up ahead, resolving to turn around after reaching it. As I approached, I saw that it was actually a young seal lying on its side, lifeless. The sand caked deep into his tufts of molting fur indicated he'd been at the mercy of the elements for a good while: the tide had breaded him, rolling him further towards the grassy dunes each time before eventually retreating to let the sun bake him dry. However peaceful his current state, the thick nest of heavy-gauge fishing line tangled around his neck made clear that his ending had been wretched. Suffocation seemed like the least of it: the plastic wiring had nearly decapitated him. Other than his neck, though, there

seemed no other evidence of grave injury; no gaping lacerations or splayed entrails, no bloodstained sand. In fact, all that surrounded him were hundreds of bird footprints. *Rubberneckers*, I figured, before noticing that the seal's eyes had been pecked out. I just hoped this feeding frenzy had happened *after* he'd died. I looked out to sea, where a handful of fishing boats trawled along the western horizon. I went back to the car, had my tuna (was that a hint of dolphin?) sandwich, and drove home.

For as untamed and unassailable as the region's natural landscape appears, it has not been spared the slow creep of human expansion. The mutilated seal was not the first collateral damage, nor, I fear, was his fate anywhere near the most unsightly: before we brought in the rifles and bulldozers, the Cape and its mountains were home to lions, hippopotami, and country's other large animals. (A handful of leopards still inhabit the region, albeit further inland, but sightings are rare.) In the abstract, this process of relentless globalization is glacial and, unless one spends time at its bleeding edge, easy to forget. But witnessing its unsightly consequences in person is deeply unsettling; it's much nicer when we don't have to see how the sausage is made.





20

FAUNA

Indeed, for as stunning as these mountains today may be, it's only in spite of us; after we got grubby paws on them, we ensured that whatever beauty they retain has very little to do with their resident fauna, a cohort which today is made up mostly of *dassies*. Despite their resemblance to groundhogs, we learned from a park ranger that these groundhog-sized animals are, unbelievably, most closely related to the elephant. They received none of the majesty of their distant cousins, however, and instead appear troubled and slightly frumpy. Their dark, beady eyes are framed by a tufted, furrowed brow, while a small, mammalian snout hangs over a thin-lipped, jowly frown. They make for harmless hiking companions, I suppose; they're furry and nonviolent, and their semicircular ears are somewhat redeeming.

But as I climbed Table mountain the weekend before I flew home, I was joined by another of the region's creatures, this one supposedly consigned to myth: not the leopard, nor the hippo, but the mountain goat.

For the first section of our trail I'd trudged up a grueling incline of rocky steps directly under the track of the cable car, every few minutes smugly giving the middle finger to the gondolas floating by on their effortless levitation to the summit. After a

grueling hour or so, we split off from that trajectory and were out of view of the gondola. The slope became almost a sheer face and, after a few minutes of hand-over-hand climbing, we rested on a rock ledge looking out over the city bowl. To our right, on a small outcrop serviced by no visible trail, stood a lone goat, stock still, contemplating the lattice of streets below.

Later that evening, I did some research and learned these goats had a curious backstory. Like that unfortunate seal, it turned out, this was another parable of human tampering. A zoo had been set up by Mr. Rhodes just outside the city on the western slopes of the cape mountains. It had housed lions and other animals, including a handful of specially-imported Himalayan goats. Sometime in the early twentieth century, a pair of these had orchestrated an escape into the forest behind the zoo and had, nobly, decided to get straight to work populating the Cape. Remembering the issues the Amish struggled with back home, I shuddered to think of the birth defects incurred here, given the starting gene pool comprised solely of our cloven-hooved Adam and Eve. Less of a gene pool; more of a gene shot glass. Luckily for the prolific couple, their genome proved resilient - so much so, in fact, that the local government decided to exterminate the ballooning population. A few stragglers had managed to evade the purge, but sightings today were rare.

But questions remained over the goats' original home - I'd never heard of such a zoo, so I asked around. Exact details were difficult to find; it seemed their lore had become urban legend. Nobody knew exactly when (or why) it had been shut down, but most rough estimates were that it had been abandoned in the 1970s or '80s. There were suggestions that several UCT students had broken into the zoo at night and had managed to disturb - and subsequently get bitten by - a lion, which may have caused the suspension of operations - some claimed it had been students who'd let the goats out those decades before.

Regardless, the zoo's ruins were left open for explorers, and I felt compelled to visit out of respect for our goat guardian. From

the campus, I followed a quiet trail beyond a car park and through a wooded area, eventually stumbling upon the outer edge of the zoo. Like any large property abandoned to dereliction, it was eerie, even on this sunny afternoon. Cement terraces, which must have been pens or cages for the smaller animals, were leveled into the gentle slopes at the base of the mountain. I came upon the largest exhibit, which had housed the lions. A tall chain-link fence surrounded a semicircular moat a few meters deep and perhaps two across. The inner peninsula had several platforms and small trees where the lions must have climbed or rested under while the crowd outside the fence watched on.

I ventured around behind this island to the lions' private enclosure, where I realized I could actually squeeze in. The individual cages each had a thick metal guillotine door that slid up at feeding time; rust now kept these stuck open or had eaten them away entirely. Stooping through these claustrophobic, graffitied passageways, whose grim trapdoors and wrought iron grates let in only brief flickers of light, it felt subterranean, as if beneath the Colosseum; following flickering torchlight where I'd wait to be summoned to meet my fate. We were just missing the baying, bloodthirsty masses. Finally, the tunnel reached a wrought iron portcullis, which opened out to the island. I'd have preferred to climb the fence rather than go back the way I came, but the moat was too wide to jump.

The concept was depressing: a zoo having been erected to display to the visitors a lion shipped in from abroad because the local ones had been slaughtered. Realizing the game drive I'd enjoyed was based on a similar premise, I took comfort in the argument that had previously been so unappealing: those private reserves sheltered and rehabilitated traumatized animals. I was nothing like those zoo-goers of yesteryear, I reassured myself. I'd paid for weeks' - *month's* worth of elephant and lion rehab, not to mention the help I'd given to the country's sharks. I'd done my bit, my conscience was clear.

The academic year was over. When I received my final grades,

I was horrified. I spoke to a few of my teachers and learned that, in South Africa, an A or A+ is almost impossible. Bs or Cs were perfectly decent results. My home school, who'd already been looking for an excuse to give me a hard time, didn't believe a word of it. Eventually, I convinced the registrar in Stellenbosch to draw up an equivalency chart which seemed to placate the Americans, who studied it for a few weeks before admitting defeat. This delay meant my graduation was an anticlimactic one: in mid-February, two months or so after returning to the US, I got a terse email from my university's administrators conceding that I had, despite their best efforts, graduated. Attached was an alumni fundraising form; the school was hoping to build a new gymnasium.

21

RENAISSANCE MAN

OR: PUBLIC INDECENCY

But never mind the minutiae; celebrations were in order: I was now a college graduate. *Hip-hip buzzah!*

This was, in fact, a huge problem - I'd never thought this far ahead. My slapdash undergraduate years had only been spent worrying only about my next assignment or test (and determining how I could pass with as little effort as possible). But I'd run out of road. The only thing in front of me was the corporate hamster wheel. Finding this prospect unpalatable, I once again set about scheming how I could buy myself some time (ideally, going back to South Africa in the meanwhile).

Furthering my education seemed like my best bet. Happily, the University of Cape Town accepted me into their master's program, which would buy me at least another year outside the States - not too shabby. But with none of the friends I'd made during my other stints still living in the city and no on-campus housing available, my only option was to use the university's database of third-party rental properties. I found a listing calling for master's students or young professionals for a four-bedroom apartment about a mile south of the campus with a terrace and a view of the surrounding mountains. This sounded terrific, so I reached out to the agent. She sent me a photo album of the house

and mentioned there were other students interested. One place was reserved for her son, she added, but he'd graciously offered to give the three of us first choice of the rooms, which were all different sizes and costs. I didn't want to miss my chance, so I told her to send me the lease papers so we could firm up my commitment. Within a few minutes I'd printed, signed, and faxed them back over. *The art of the deal*, I thought, thrilled to have wrapped this up so easily. Who said landlords were difficult to work with?

I could now turn to the rest of the requirements which, alas, included applying for yet another visa. Trying to keep my chakras positive, I reasoned that this second iteration would be nothing but a formality. I'd already done the hard graft of blazing the trail and familiarizing myself with the consulate's idiosyncrasies. Sure enough, I romped home, effortlessly side-stepping the traps which had hamstrung me on my first go round.

One bullet point remained. Its demand? The applicant (me) must not have tuberculosis. No bother; last time, I'd only needed to get a TB *skin test* (for anyone interested, The Mantoux test was its official name); it was free, painless, and took about thirty seconds. But as I examine the website I notice a small tweak: where it used to say "skin test *or* X-Ray", it now only says X-Ray, a procedure which, in the US, costs hundreds of dollars and is far more difficult to schedule and apply for. I call over to my friends at the embassy, who I'm positive will have fielded - even *one* time - a question on this topic. But no, they protest. There have been no inquiries regarding X-rays, proprietary paper stock, nor anything of the sort. In fact, they assure me vehemently, this is the first time they've heard *anyone* have a question about this or, for that matter, any other visa, or their respective requirements.

Though predictable, their final remark was no less infuriating: they also categorically deny the checklist has undergone any updates, insisting the tuberculosis section has always been the same. I thank them very much for their time, and once I've calmed down I can't help but be impressed by the consistency of the embassy's hiring criteria - it seems any applicants who aren't

unfailingly skeptical, irritable, and wholly incompetent are immediately disqualified: in dozens of phone calls to the multiple offices over the last few years, I had not yet spoken to one person who'd even *pretended* to understand my inquiries or even feigned sympathy.

Believe it or not, this realization was actually helpful, as it confirmed my suspicions beyond any reasonable doubt: it was most likely I was part of a social experiment to test the limits of human compliance. They knew their position of authority, however artificial, however arbitrary, could be leveraged, given that lay people will do just about anything they're told by people in power.

Where were we? I phone my doctor to tell him that I need an X-ray. This can't be right, he says.

"It doesn't make sense that they want to unnecessarily expose you to radiation. We only do X-Rays for tuberculosis if the preliminary skin test first turns up positive."

I relay his concerns to the consulates. My rewards are: getting hung up on by Washington, placed on indefinite hold by New York, and told it is the day off for the man in charge of visas by L.A. (curiously, this had also happened each of the previous times I'd called). Chicago, who at least stays on the line, remains steadfast in the face of logic, reason, and professional medical advice, and reaffirms the website's ruling. I call my local hospital to schedule my \$300 X-Ray.

"We don't usually let people schedule a scan like this unless they've received a 'positive' reading from a skin test. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Not particularly."

After receiving my unnecessary dose of radiation, I once again set out at dawn to arrive before the visa office's late-morning lunch banquet-and-siesta break. I arrived in good time and presented my packet. Within a matter of seconds, he smugly sent me away because my travel insurance was in black and white. Who

could have predicted such a thing? I tried to negotiate with him, despite knowing the outcome.

“Oh no-perhaps I can send you the document so you can print it in color?”

“We aren’t allowed to give out our email addresses.”

“Well, I brought my laptop. Can I connect and print it myself?”

“We don’t let anyone connect to our devices, for security reasons. There’s a printing shop nearby. Unfortunately, you probably won’t make it back in time.”

He could barely hide his delight. I put on a dejected face and slunk out of the office. But I was playing rope-a-dope; this was all part of the plan. So negligible had my faith been in the little Machiavellian goblin that I’d brought with me a small, battery-charged generator, along with our family’s printer. Once out of the office’s line of sight, I sprinted to my car around the corner and crawled into the backseat to set up my chaotic printing station. After a few minutes, I strode back into the embassy, chest out, shoulders back, jawline sharp, biceps and abs tensed, my freshly-produced documentation in hand. I slammed them down (well, politely passed them through) and watched as he perused them, desperately searching for any disqualifying criteria. But there were none. Confounded, the man stamped the still-warm papers and sent me on my way.

I had broken free from their labyrinth, their matrix. Though I’d fought my way out so valiantly, I couldn’t help but feel that they could have prolonged my travails indefinitely had they wanted to: just look at how they’d toyed with the young Nebraskan man before my last trip, turning him into a long-haul truck driver.

Between the embassy and my universities, I couldn’t help but feel like a pawn in someone else’s game. Whether or not the South Africans were in cahoots with the carbon paper people, the X-ray people, the travel insurance people, the FBI, or any of the other agen-

cies or companies I had to fork over my money to is (and will likely remain) a mystery. My university, who required dozens of hours of convincing before letting me study abroad or graduate, had been similarly unhelpful. In the end, I'd not only had to figure out everything for myself, but I'd had to pay for the privilege, and had also helped about 15 different companies and agencies line their pockets. I'd been pinballed around, given these people far too much control over my time and body, and for what? I'd been scanned, poked, prodded, given the runaround, gaslighted, undermined, charged, charged again, kept in the dark, taunted, charged again, been scolded for not respecting or adhering to rules I'd never been informed were in place, and hung up on at least a dozen times. All for the privilege of being able to enter a country and study at one of its schools (who'd already accepted me, by the way) for a few months - at my own expense!

For that matter, I thought the whole point was that we'd defeated bureaucracy. Weren't we supposed to be streamlined, optimized, hyper-efficient? These systems, whose stated purpose was to facilitate the pursuit of prosperity, education, and health, sure seemed like they had other priorities. They were some combination of bloated, obsolete, or money-grubbing, and had hampered me more than anything else.

I wondered how many would-be tourists had been deterred by these ridiculous requirements. Nickel-and-diming everyone in the knowledge that a few of them (like me) will acquiesce might not be the smartest decision. Someone who's deterred by the prospect of having to shell out several hundred dollars for an X-Ray would, I'm certain, have spent more than that amount had they been allowed to visit the country - a half-baked example, but you get the point. For a country suffering from brain drain, you'd have thought they'd want to incentivize young, engaged people to visit and eventually immigrate. At a certain point, regulation deters would-be contributors and participants and hurts our ambitions in the long term.



I would leave for Cape Town just after the New Year. South Africa's academic year, like ours, commences in late summer. For them, of course, this means January or early February. Summer or not, though, the water stays bitter cold (for those not situated on the balmy Indian ocean). Nevertheless, there remains a vibrant beach and surf culture along the coast of the country. With this in mind, the first contact I had from Richard, the landlady's son, was not too bizarre: a picture of a couple of guys in wetsuits beachside unloading scuba equipment from the trunk of a car, with the caption "Dear Jack: Cape Town awaits..."

How titillating: a social, adventurous spirit with a flair for the dramatic. Scuba diving in shark-infested waters? Hell, diving even *with* the protection of a cage had pushed me to the limit. His next message removed any doubt we were witnessing a tour de force of dynamism. Another future roommate had sent a message in our group chat. It turned out his name was Fundi, and he'd be arriving the next evening. The two had a brief back and forth in Xhosa, a sub-Saharan dialect used exclusively by the black tribes which had lived in southern Africa long before white colonists from Holland and England arrived. For what it's worth, there aren't many white Americans who'd be able to make small talk in, say, Navajo. Switching back to English, the scuba diver generously offered to pick me up from the airport on the day of my arrival, explaining that he had a few days free because his legal team had just won a court case. For the sake of identifying each other at the airport, he told me he'd wear his most visible shirt: a bright pink commemorative tee from Cape Town's gay pride march. *My goodness*, I thought, *he's got a hell of a resume!*

I collected my suitcase and emerged into the arrivals hall, where I scanned the crowd expectantly. I could only see one pink shirt. It was being worn by a short, pasty man with a... *unique* body shape. Though not overweight in a traditional sense, he had no visible muscle tone; a thick layer of insulation gave his bulk a certain shapelessness. In lieu of a neck, wide shoulders served as buttresses, sloping upwards and connecting to a plump, square

head just below the ears (which were tiny, and almost invisible from straight on). The entire top half of his face was dominated by a flat forehead, confining his features to the lower half. Wide-set, beady eyes sat on either side of a round, pink nose while their pupils, slightly misaligned, floated in dull, watery-gray irises. A pelt of dense, mousy hair crawled up from behind his collar, spread up and over the back of his head, becoming wispier as it ascended.

We left the airport and killed a few minutes with scuba-diving small talk. It caught my eye that his car was an automatic; in all my time in Africa, I'd never ridden in anything but a stick-shift. This, he explained, was a point of pride: none of his family had ever learned how to drive manual, nor did they care to. It was preferable to just find automatic cars on the market, no matter how hard they had to look or where they'd have to be imported from. At the subsequent lull in conversation, he asked if he could play some music.

"Please," I said, expecting to hear fascinating, secretly-recorded folk music from some tribe deep in the Kalahari. I was fantastically wide of the mark: cacophonous death metal started blasting from the car's tinny speakers. My chauffeur screamed to make himself heard.

"Overthrust!"

I tilted my head towards the car's speaker, squinting my eyes and pursing my lips slightly to give the impression that I nearly recognized the song. Gesturing to the radio console, he elucidated.

"I love this band, they're one of the most promising to come out of Botswana for years."

We took our exit off the highway's overpass, and as we peeled down towards the road below us which would take us to our neighborhood, he pointed out of my passenger-side window.

"That gray building there is where I get my kilts made."

We got to Rondebosch and arrived at the house, a detached family home whose two stories had been split into three segments;

the four of us would share the top floor, while two other separate, smaller groups lived downstairs.

“My mother figured it would be easier to just buy the whole top flat while I was still in university. That way, I’d have a place to stay and could make friends.”

This was an early indication that things were to become complicated. The production would feature two main characters juggling complex roles: Sue as landlady, capo, and mother; Richard as henchman, son, and roommate. Leslie, Fundi, and I, had given no consent to participate, but were to be their foil nevertheless, playing the straight men for the performance that would decidedly be staged at our expense.



Officially, of course, the hierarchy was simple: Sue, the governess, presiding over four lessees of equal standing. She and her son even claimed he’d signed a lease agreement as legally binding as ours, requiring monthly payments and a commitment to the same code of conduct as his roommates. Nevertheless, Richard sought authority in his own right, but opportunities to attain this without his mother’s help proved scarce. His array of theatrical gestures earned him none of the lasting respect and adulation he’d been hoping for. But, as he apparently had no interest in committing to any of those noble causes beyond a superficial level, he decided his best chance of asserting dominance was to go on the front foot.

I made clear from the off that I wasn’t going to be amenable, so he avoided direct confrontation, leaving me for his mother (...of which more to come). Leslie, though, was far more docile. *His* relationship with Richard, however, was a delicate (and indeed highly peculiar) one. But more on that later, too. This left the waiflike, studious Fundi as the only available whipping boy, which, all things considered, was a more than satisfactory option for our frustrated troglodyte.

For a country with a recent history like South Africa's, there is no social or economic stratum not constantly reminded of the country's history of violently enforced power dynamics. Educated and wealthy citizens know exactly how much influence they wield, as well as how it can be leveraged when needed. The historically disenfranchised, meanwhile, are offered an education on these topics by force. In a society so fraught with tension, the weight of a supposed goodwill gesture thus increases exponentially in proportion to how much power one has over the recipient. These gifts are often solely for the benefit of the giver's conscience - the credit you can manufacture for yourself is intoxicating. It also becomes clear that those most willing to discuss their munificence and compassion are the first to break character.

Take, for instance, the man who's in the middle of getting his second postgraduate degree. His parents, real estate developers who've enrolled him in expensive private schools for his whole life, own a game lodge on a reserve in Botswana, where they vacation as a family several times per year because "it helps us feel connected to this beautiful continent." If *he* decides to learn a few sentences of the local language so that he can commune with the locals, he is afforded (in his mother's eyes, if nobody else's) papal regard. This only grows as he espouses his desire for South Africa to jettison its name in favor of "Azania" (a name proposed by many after apartheid that better represents a beautiful, diverse population and carries no baggage of colonialism). He gets bonus points for wearing a gay pride shirt and for hanging a Palestinian flag in his room. The trouble arises when all this performative solidarity fails to command commensurate respect.

There were never any physical altercations, nor even many raised voices, but there was an undeniable subtext, and by the end of the year there had accumulated too many uncomfortable interactions to discount. These started early on: during our first week, Richard came into the kitchen to see Fundi using the ice tray, which was of the overcomplicated, double-layered variety, one silicone and the other an outer plastic casing. The tray had seen

too many winters, likely having been purchased in a bundle with the flophouse bed years before. Fundi twisted the cracked, brittle plastic to loosen the ice.

Richard, who'd been watching carefully, sidled over - as if he had been waiting for the opportunity - and piped up.

"Fundi, you must be careful with that. Look - you've damaged it." Fundi denied this, which only provoked our host further, who pointed to a crack in the casing.

"You're going to have to get us a new one. If you don't, my mother will find out."

Fundi protested again, which the aggressor didn't appreciate one bit.

"Fine, *don't* replace it. You probably couldn't have afforded it anyway."

For those curious, this conversation happened in English. It's perhaps worth noting that, after the first exhibition in our texting group chat, none of us saw or heard any evidence of Richard speaking in a tribal tongue ever again. It seemed the "commune with the locals" box had been sufficiently ticked.

Richard had found a fix, however unethical, for his power craving. Whenever he heard Fundi in the kitchen, he'd emerge from his room to stand in the kitchen doorway and oversee operations; of course, such supervision only happened on occasions in which just the two of them were home. On multiple occasions, Richard stormed in to check if Fundi was microwaving something without using the plastic humidity dome (he wasn't) before screaming furiously about the need to protect the machine's inner lining. Naturally, as soon as I heard about this fixation, I resolved to never use the dome. Curiously, not once during the year did he comment on my culinary imprudence.

That weekend, Fundi had invited a friend over to watch a movie. This didn't suit our host, who stormed into the common room asking when they were planning to be finished (he'd hoped to watch a movie of his own). The next day, the landlady berated Fundi over the phone, telling him in no uncertain terms that he

was forbidden to have any guests in the house without her written pre-approval.

One day, I arrived back from class to see a thick bundle of wires running down the length of our narrow hallway. These led from under Richard's door, down the length of the hallway, and were stretched diagonally across the common room to reach the internet router. I greeted Fundi, who was in the kitchen, then followed the wires back to the door under which they had emerged. I knocked and, when Richard came out, I asked him what was going on. "Well, the Wi-Fi didn't reach down the hall before, and I need the internet to be able to play my games. So, I had my mother send someone in to set me up with a hard-wire connection. Should be much faster."

The wires would be a hazard, I said, so we'd have to tape them to the ceiling or at least along the skirting.

"I'd really prefer we left them as is, I don't want anything to slow the connection."

Fundi, whose room was further from the router than Richard's, chimed in.

"I've been emailing your mother since we moved into this place, asking her for a new, stronger router or a wire like yours. I pay her for Wi-Fi like all of you guys do, and I can't even connect to it."

"Shame," he grimaced, feigning sympathy, "You'll have to take it up with her."



With this, Richard realized the apartment itself offered a wealth of opportunities to assert himself; not only over Fundi but all of us. This, of course, required conceding to us that his mother *had* conferred upon him a higher ranking, thus undermining their official party line. Nevertheless, it seemed this was a trade-off he was happy to make. If we so much as tried to shift the furniture in the living room or on the terrace by a few inches, he would object,

reminding us that, as he'd been entrusted with the layout, we couldn't take any action without asking his mother first. He didn't make the rules, he said apologetically; his hands were tied. Whenever we sought the mother's assent, of course, she instantly deferred to her son.

From the flat's entrance ran a straight, narrow corridor, at the end of which were doors to the bathroom and the outdoor terrace. Lining the hallway's right side were the bedroom doors, and opposite was a lone, wider entrance to the common room (about four meters by four), whose right-hand wall had an identical opening to access a small galley kitchen. Despite the property having been listed as "fully furnished" in the rental housing database (thereby allowing the landlady to charge us a premium for such a luxury), my roommates and I had arrived to find our rooms almost completely empty but for our cheap chipboard desks. "In South Africa, you see, even 'furnished' apartments never include beds," she'd explained matter-of-factly when I met her in person. Our flat's only "fully furnished" room was therefore the common room, which contained a jumbled assortment (accumulated over the years from his previous apartments, he said), including couple of old rattan dining chairs and a long wooden table that was positioned immediately inside the room and ran parallel to the hallway, barricading almost the entirety of the room's entrance.

As it seemed obvious this room would be a thoroughfare, I wondered aloud whether the table must have been in limbo, awaiting a group decision on where it could be placed more practically in the otherwise almost empty room. Indeed, to realize any of its intended benefits, it would have been more useful *anywhere* other than its exact position. He responded with surprise, explaining that,

"Mother left the interior decorating to me, and I went with my gut. I wanted to make the entrance a little smaller so that the room would feel more cozy. Anyway, we have to make this work, because the table can't be removed from the apartment. In fact, we had it shipped specially from our last house - the workmen

winched it up over the balcony, like you would with a piano. They did the same for the bed.”

“Wait a second - you got a *bed*?” I couldn’t believe it; having fallen for their “furnished” ruse, I’d had to waste my first few days going mattress and box-spring shopping around town (more on this later) while, apparently, folks were renting cranes to lift stuff up to our second floor with the sole intent of narrowing our doorways.

“No, I’m not talking about the bed in my room. The workers managed to get that up the stairs without much trouble. No, *this* one.” He patted the piece behind me fondly. It looked like a sort of futon, though one without the capability of transforming into a couch. As such, it was just a low wooden frame supporting a lumpy, queen-size mattress upholstered in brown velour corduroy. In spirit, it seemed closest to those round or heart-shaped beds you might find in a bachelor pad or seedy motel; the only thing missing was a mirrored ceiling above. Given its position in the center of the room, the piece seemed to have pride of place.

“This old girl,” Richard noted with a smirk, “has gotten some *heavy* usage... Oh, yeah. She’s seen some terrible, terrible things.”

I asked him if he’d ever had the chance to use the storied mat with a partner of his own.

“No, but don’t you worry. Let’s just say I’ve gotten my fair share of kicks on here.”

I didn’t ask him to elaborate, and he smirked again.

“Anyway, she’s retired now. But she’ll be great for when we have our movie nights.” He gestured to the screen in the corner. “I had the construction crew set that up - it took them a few hours with all the drilling they had to do. Apparently, there are important wires behind that part of the wall, so it was kind of dangerous.”

Not only had he chosen the small corner between the room’s two adjacent openings, but rather than angling it to face outwards into the room, he had instructed the crew to mount the screen

flush to the wall, facing lengthwise down the table. Given the steel brackets which fixed the screen's direction and lack of surrounding furniture (save for the mattress), it was clear the table was the intended vantage point for any onscreen entertainment. But anyone seated at the head of the table, closest to the television, would have faced directly away from the screen, and the other end was pushed up against the opposite wall, leaving no space for a viewer. And, given the room's entrance had already been hopelessly constricted, pulling that end of the table away from that wall and towards the television would have completely barred access to the room (unless you were willing to crawl under the table). As for the longer sides, sitting on one of these would have left you completely in the hallway. This left just the opposite side from which you could conceivably sit and have a view of the television.

Fine. But even then, it wasn't clear what our host envisaged would happen when more than one person wanted to watch something: he had mounted the screen at waist-level, which meant your only hope would be if your guests were happy to sit from shortest to tallest, lest those further from the screen would need to stand.



The table remained a point of contention throughout the year. Because we were all on different schedules, most of our meals were prepared and eaten alone while watching television or, weather permitting, on the terrace; the table was thus wholly unnecessary. Richard, for whom the piece represented community and group bonding, was reluctant. He said he was "really disappointed we didn't appreciate the table" and the lengths he had gone to transport it (by which he must have referred to his overseeing of the crew of laborers who'd hauled it up to the second story). "It's just that, at my last house, the girls used to prepare big, delicious meals that we'd sit down and have as a group. I was hoping we were

going to do the same thing here.” But I had never heard him express any such wishes in the months prior. In fact, he had never sought to coordinate with any of us on schedule or recipe-related matters. What he *had* done was bring back large Tupperware containers of pre-prepared curries and pastas after his visits to his mother, though a share of these was never offered to us. The evidence at hand indicated the true state of affairs was something closer to “At mealtimes, I used to hang around my roommates, who were already intimidated by me because of my exhibitionism and my penchant for falling over and passing out near (or under) where they were hooking up with their boyfriends, and because they knew my mom owned *that* flat too. For all our sakes, it was much easier for them to give me a bowl of food and shut me up than to confront me about any of these issues. That system worked well for me over the past couple of years, and ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,’ as they say. I hoped having the workmen put this table here would act as a gesture of goodwill for *our* dining schedule going forward. On that note, I skipped lunch earlier, so I’m getting peckish. What’s on the menu?” I felt a twang of pity for those girls who, it sounded like, had been guilted into making him food under threat of physical advance (scaling in aggression proportionally to his hunger). He could be placated only by heaped piles of meat, pasta, and bread, which lulled him into a carbo-doze and bought them some quiet time before he got cantankerous again.

The next flat-related incident occurred soon afterwards. Electricity (in both the house and South Africa in general) was hotly contested. The power grid, nationalized and under constant changes of bad-faith ownership, was at any given point never as productive or efficient as it needed to be. This meant there was an official rota dictating when electricity would be rationed (cut) in each zip code. Depending on the severity of the shortage, a given district might go without power from just two hours once or twice a week, to every day for all but a few hours. Given that we usually had forewarning, this situation wasn’t too

grave, but it was irritating being stuck waiting for someone to finish using the kitchen when you hadn't yet made dinner and the power was about to disappear until three o'clock in the morning.

Unsurprisingly, the amount of electricity included in rent payments was therefore also contentious. In our case, we were allotted about 30 dollars'-worth per month. When we ran out, we had to go to the grocery store for a voucher to top-up the apartment's power. The three of us took turns making these trips all year; we did our best, but we could never quite make our ration last. Although the supply was hugely different than our home countries', the demand wasn't: our appliances, made to European standards, had no sympathy for the shenanigans in which South Africa was embroiled. Putting one load of clothes through the German-made washing machine, for example, drained about 10% of our monthly ration. Manageable, you might have thought, but this meant Leslie's practice of never wearing anything more than once before putting it through a full wash cycle quickly became exasperating (for reasons beyond its excess water usage in a country crippled by drought).

Warmth, too, became a precious commodity: many houses in South Africa aren't built with insulation in mind and become frigid in the sodden, stormy winters, during which temperatures overnight drop close to freezing. With no central heating or fireplace, the only option was to get an energy-guzzling space heater to warm your room.

One day, after not having seen Richard for over a week, I arrived home to see him standing over two workmen in the kitchen. They had shifted our refrigerator, stove, and washing machine to make space, and seemed to be installing a dishwasher. I tried to figure out what was going on.

"Your mom didn't mention we were getting one of these - I wonder why she's putting it in. We've never once complained about having to wash our own dishes and, besides, our cleaner is always nice enough to do any dishes left in the sink."

“Well, it was actually *me* who asked for the dishwasher. I hate doing the dishes, so I’d rather just use the machine.”

I believed him - I had referenced the cleaner pointedly, as it was he who took advantage of her kindness. Our kitchen had a normal sink but also a larger, industrial one in the back corner; though his visits were short, he would fill these with overflowing piles of used pots, pans, and tableware before leaving the house with the knowledge that she’d clean up his mess. When I saw him later that evening, I confronted him on behalf of the other two, who also opposed his unilateral decision not only due to its budgetary impact but also on principle.

“We should have taken a vote on the decision beforehand. This affects us all, so you should have asked us what we thought about it before having your mom buy this for you. It’s easy for you to say it’s not a big deal - you don’t have to pay for extra electricity like we do: you use our power and then, when we run out, you just drive home and hide for the rest of the month until we have more.”

Indeed, along with the dishes, he liked to leave multiple duffel bags of soiled clothes on his bed for the cleaner to launder so as to drain our electricity rations rather than his family’s. I asked if he or his mom would provide more electricity for us, given that his use of the appliance would affect the finances of the rest of us.

“Well no, since you’ll all use the machine too!”

“No, we won’t.”

This caused Richard, who so often reminded us that he pursued a law degree, to abandon rational thought and invoke old tried-and-true.

“You’ll have to take it up with my mother. She’s the landlady, after all. She approved the dishwasher, and any decision she makes is final. I don’t want to get on her bad side.”

With all this having overwhelmed the future barrister, he scurried back to his room, threw some clothes (which the cleaner had ironed and folded for him) in a small suitcase and drove home, where he remained for the next week. For the record, the

ironing wasn't in her job description, but she'd been instructed to do whatever he needed. Sue agreed to return the machine, and reminded us to go directly to her regarding any future issues so her son wouldn't be put in a difficult position. We were instructed not to touch the dishwasher left untethered in the middle of the kitchen for several days while it awaited the collection crew. Our celebrations were tempered by this lingering, unsightly reminder. It was reminiscent of how America left airfields and military bases full of hummers, tanks, and aircraft in their wake. A graveyard of disabled, burned-out vehicles and infrastructure. *You may have won this skirmish, but make no mistake: this is still our arena.*



A month or so after the dishwasher fracas, we received an invitation for another one of Richard's get-togethers. Momentarily, I thought this was in the spirit of reconciliation, before noticing the party's location was listed as our apartment. The first paragraph began by stating that, "The Bhoys of Outeniqua House have become fatigued from academic rigor. In light of this, we've decided to inject some levity - by which we mean alcohol - into our work process by having a night of intoxicated presentations."

The rules for participation were then laid out: firstly, upon their arrival to the party, all entrants were required to chug two pints of beer. When your name was drawn to present your academic thesis to the group, you'd need to take three shots before getting up to speak. Everyone had to gulp down another pint before each subsequent presentation, and *another* as a group upon completion of the final demonstration. There was also an appendix detailing a drinking punishment featuring scuba equipment: a full-face dive mask was strapped to the kneeling victim's face, while assistants (standing) poured alcohol down the mask's air tubes they held above. The only way for the victim to avoid

drowning in a liter of mead or boxed wine was to try and swallow the deluge before it filled up the mask.

I have no idea how many attendees there were in the end but, when I checked the online invite page on the evening of the party, I saw it'd been sent out to 50 people. Seven had RSVP'd that they'd be attending, with the rest having declined the invite...well, in fairness, a handful of that 43 had said they were "maybe interested". Of the seven who'd confirmed, Richard was one, while three more were his cohabitants, who had confirmed our attendance out of pity. On the day he sent the invitation, he'd visited each of our rooms in turn to stand over us and read his witty prose to us in person, lingering in our doorways with a self-satisfied smile until we promised to attend. Exciting as the party promised to be, I made plans to be out of town the weekend of this obligatory get-together, as did Leslie. The fact that neither of us would be there worried me.

Sure enough, I arrived back on Sunday afternoon to find our apartment in tatters. Furniture and cushions were strewn through the hall and common room, with a sticky coating on most of the hardwood floor. Outside on the terrace, our small barbeque grill had been knocked over, apparently while in use: its spilt coals had burned a large hole through the artificial turf which covered half of the porch. A few feet away, knocked over onto the cement, were a few of the old chairs from our dining room. For convenience, someone had brought the entire cutlery drawer out from our kitchen, but it now lay upside down, its contents scattered around the terrace. It had rained heavily in the early hours of the morning, meaning all this wooden debris, which had already occupied varying states of decay and shabbiness, was now also waterlogged.

One dining chair suffered no water damage as it had been left inside. It had only been spared, however, because someone, it seemed, had stood on it while wearing what looked to have been stiletto heels roughly six inches in girth, puncturing the brittle wicker and leaving a gaping hole. Upon realizing it looked exactly

like the chair in which Daniel Craig gets tortured in *Casino Royale*, it crossed my mind that perhaps a similar ceremony had taken place at Richard's behest. Perhaps the threat of emasculation had been nestled somewhere in the web of sub-paragraphs and clauses dictating the party's rules:

- Rule number four: If someone passes out with their shoes on, they're fair game to be meddled with: shaving cream, Sharpies - the works!
- Rule number five: In this house, we hold our liquor! Anyone caught vomiting will be stripped down and tied to our favorite chair, which we call *The Castrator*.
- Rule number six: don't change the music without asking one of the hosts first!

Though it seemed unlikely there were any freshly neutered eunuchs in the area, we couldn't rule out my theory entirely, given the track record of the revelers in question; I resolved to keep an eye out for anyone along the neighboring river path whose walk of shame looked particularly ginger.

While the extent of the damage wrought in just one night tested credulity, the party's host having gone incognito was less surprising. Leslie, who'd returned in the morning, had seen Richard hurriedly packing a small suitcase before throwing it in his car and screeching away down the street. This checked out: the front gate was wide open. The culprit was AWOL for the next 72 hours, ignoring our messages stating that, "someone" (he) was *at least* going to have to get rid of the strange viscous coating that made it impossible to walk through the house for fear of infection. He eventually reached out via text message to explain his hurried exit. His mother, you understand, had invited him home for a lunch she was preparing, and he hadn't wanted to "get in her bad books" by missing it - or by arriving even a minute late - it must have been a real marathon of a lunch: he didn't come back to the apartment for the rest of the week. He assured us, however,

there was nothing to worry about; the cleaner would be there in the morning to tackle the spillage, which had already stained and had now begun to warp the floorboards.



Despite his avowed pride in our apartment's feng shui, Richard mostly stayed at his parents' house nearby. On the occasions he stuck around a little longer, we'd know at dawn, when his alarm clock, set to play screeching death metal, filled the house. (On several occasions, this was substituted for "Who Let the Dogs Out" or his other favorite song, a high-pitched, accelerated remix of "Barbie Girl.") As he was a heavy sleeper (and had usually come home late and drunk), the music would often fail to wake him and continue playing until one of us could take it no longer and sprinted down the hall to thump on his door, whereupon he'd stop the music and fall back asleep for another few hours. At some point, he'd lumber down the hallway to take a shower (during which the music would resume), before donning his skirt and splaying himself out in the living room.

The first weekend after we'd all settled into the apartment, I was awoken by *Overtrust* from the bathroom, where Richard was showering while screaming along to the music. I went into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. He must have heard me pottering around as he emerged from the bathroom, and stopped in to greet me. He was half naked, with a towel around his waist. As he leant against the kitchen archway, blocking my exit, he showed me a handful of what looked like gravel.

"I accidentally broke your pumice stone. Do you want me to get you a new one?"

The prick knew it was mine because we each had a shelf in the bathroom's cupboard; the stone had been buried somewhere along the back wall with the other toiletries I'd brought from the states, and nowhere near the front of the ledge, where it might have been inadvertently knocked to the floor. So, although it had

only cost a few dollars, I was still annoyed: he must have been using it to grind the dead skin from his wide, clubbed feet. This was - and I'm sure you'll sympathize - something I couldn't abide. This was my punishment for thinking that I could have nice things, I guess; not even my pumice stone was safe. We couldn't spend the whole year like this, dancing to their little tune. We had to claw back some respect. In light of this, I played hard-ball.

"Actually, yeah, that would be great. Or just pay me back for it whenever you get a chance."

He waddled away into his room, emerging a few minutes later with a mittful of damp coins. I waved them away:

"On second thought, don't sweat it. Just buy me a drink the next time we're at the bar."

Feeling retaliatory, I then mentioned that his music had carried through the whole house and undoubtedly disturbed the others. He was skeptical.

"I don't believe it - I tested all the rooms for sound."

Of that I have no doubt, I thought, leaving a wide berth as I circumnavigated him on my way back to my room. He'd begun shifting the bed towards the middle of the room in the direction of the television. For the next couple of hours, I heard Japanese-sounding shrieking and wailing. I eventually got hungry and reluctantly ventured out again, where I saw that the yelling was, indeed, coming from the anime videos he was watching at maximum volume. But this was the least of it.

Our host lay in repose on the mat. With no smaller pillows or cushions to hand, he'd interlocked his hands behind his head to tilt it up and create a sightline for his low-set eyes to peer over his swollen gut. His legs were bent and spread wide, as if he'd been told to assume the position for a pap smear. The towel he'd been wearing earlier had been replaced by a low-rise Indian sarong, the hem of which was hoicked up around his furry haunches. I could tell he was hoping I would compliment his fashion choice, so I obliged. His eyes lit up.

"Thanks! My roommates used to hate me wearing this

around, but it's so airy and light, it just lets everything stay dry all day. It's my favorite thing to do - just relax for a while and enjoy the breeze. I like to treat myself to wearing it on the weekends. Luckily, it's now a guys' house, so it won't be an issue."

Richard was correct to presume that we'd likely forgive a bit of public indecency; boys will be boys, after all. But there was a limit to our patience. As time passed, it became obvious he was getting more comfortable. Soon, almost every weekend was marked by one of us walking in on him groping or petting himself. Looking back on that first encounter, the signs were there. I had noticed he'd been kneading his crotch, but I'd assumed this was just a part of his process; using the heels of his hands to perform a sort of half-massaging, half pat-drying technique. It didn't take long before we'd cottoned on to our elder's fantasy of being caught lube-handed. If it hadn't already been apparent, we had a serious chain-of-command issue on our hands. The man whose silk skirt we were looking up didn't just have himself by the balls: he happened to have a bedroom just down the hall in a foreign country 8,000 miles from home, as well as our rental deposits.



Another eventful evening occurred during our winter break in June while I was in England visiting family. A few days before my flight back to South Africa, I woke up to multiple panicked messages from Leslie, who reported that a large glass pane in our front door had been smashed and its retractable security gate was also broken, having been forcibly wrenched out of the way to get access to the door behind. He'd discovered the damage the morning after staying at a friend's house and, fearing he'd stumbled into an active crime scene, had decided to make himself scarce. He was now sitting at a café and waiting to hear from Richard, who he'd seen the night before but was now nowhere to be found.

Leslie's story was worrying but, unfortunately, entirely believable; he had been robbed at knifepoint outside a nearby restaurant less than a month before and, just a few days afterwards, while he and I sat on the terrace after class one afternoon, we heard screaming coming from the nature trail behind our house. A woman had been mugged in broad daylight, with the offenders running off down the trail. We watched on, helpless, as she chased them before giving up. Worse still, one of the flats downstairs had been ransacked just a couple of weeks before; the investigation was still ongoing.

Until now, Richard had proudly assumed the role of chief security officer, happily scolding us on any occasions where he adjudged us to have been reckless (only locking the door, for example, and leaving its protective gate open). Not that he considered himself equally bound to these regulations, of course; as the only one of us with a car to occupy the property's lone parking spot, he had the lone remote and would invariably speed away without closing the electric gate behind him. The ground-floor neighbors, fearing another break-in, regularly knocked on our door to ask if he was planning to come back and close it for their sake. Later that morning, after a few hours of detective work, we discovered that the architects of the latest break-in attempt had been associates of none other than our resident scuba and Hentai connoisseur.

One of his old roommates (who was, indeed, a user of the storied bed, but more on that in a moment) had organized a night on the town to introduce him to her new boyfriend. At Richard's insistence, Leslie had joined the group on the first stop of their bar crawl but, as it turned out, the girl's new boy-toy was a hardline Afrikaner nationalist who soon became verbally abusive and openly homophobic towards several strangers at the bar. Uncomfortable, Leslie then split off to join his own friends elsewhere in the city. The honeymooners caroused for another few hours before deciding to send their evening hurtling towards its climax. Having come from out of town, they'd been invited to

spend the night at our apartment by Richard. After leaving the bar, they realized that, though they had the remote control for the front gate, they only had *one* of the three necessary keys to get into the flat. This meant they were able to get past the main gate for the property and through the main door of the house, but were locked out of our flat's front door and its security gate. The girl and her smooth-brained associate decided to force open the metal gate to gain access to our door before smashing one of its glass panes to get access to the handle. What our Bonnie and Clyde didn't realize was that it was a deadbolt lock - turning the handle without a key wouldn't do anything. Not that they didn't try *any* key; they wedged one of their own into the lock, which, naturally, got stuck. Having broken the glass with his bare hands, the racist lunkhead now sported a deep laceration down his arm and was bleeding profusely. Given that our foyer lacked the requisite materials for a tourniquet, the duo decided their best course of action was to drive their car back to the farmlands from whence they'd come.

Upon his return to the apartment later that night, Richard was able to extract their key from our door but, in trying to wrench loose the gate they'd forced open, had damaged it further. As things stood, we now had a gate jammed stuck into a retracted accordion, while the door it once protected had a hole smashed through it and a broken lock of its own. A sticky one, then, regarding our good old chain of command. We dutifully reported the damage to our landlady, requesting new locks for the gate and the door and new sets of keys made for both. Ideally, we noted, these jobs would be completed with haste, given the break-in downstairs just a few weeks earlier.

"Not to worry," she told me over the phone, she totally understood our concerns and had already set the wheels in motion to resolve our issue. It was her son, the tenant, who'd been tasked with this crucial job, and who, incidentally, I could now hear whining in the background.

"Wait a second," I said, "that sounds like Richard. He's been

with you all day? But you said you didn't know about any of this until I called!"

Her son's handling of the issue was predictable: it was almost a month before any repairs were made. Even then, it was *another* couple of weeks before we got our own individual keys; he'd had only one made for the three of us to share. The delay, he explained, was because the local locksmith was quite expensive, so he'd been waiting for his monthly allowance from mother (he'd blown last month's on the first day, copping a hotly-anticipated action figure which had just been released). During the interim, he decided that he'd be more protected (both from crime and our pestering) at his parents' house. For those of us without the luxury of retreating to country estates, this period was, you can imagine, nerve-wracking.



Once we had new keys secured, however, we could be open with our disdain. We'd long known that the stout troglodyte and his dominatrix were in cahoots, and now totally abandoned any effort to dignify their claims to the contrary. This meant that, towards the end of the year, actual interactions were rare, such was his aversion towards us and the confrontations which guaranteed to follow. The room to his door was locked, but we could see from its window out on the terrace it was mostly unchanged within (albeit his prized action figures still lined the walls). Occasionally, we'd hear the front gate open, and comings and goings from his room in the middle of the night. Or we'd be getting back from class to see him rush to his car, and crunch his way through a three-point turn before careening away. It became obvious that he was only using the apartment for its washing machine and commode. We'd often come out in the morning to see the cleaner doing four consecutive loads of his laundry, or desperately plunging a toilet he'd blocked.

One night, my friend accidentally postponed one of these

stealth bombing runs. A few of us were outside on the terrace playing cards, he needed to pee, and ran inside to the bathroom. The door creaked open behind him, and he heard a hoarse grunt.

“Just give me a second and she’s all yours.”

He heard a heavy shuffle back down the hallway, but by the time he finished his business and turned around, the hallway was empty. We had presumed Richard wasn’t home, as there’d been no light visible through his terrace window. Though we looked outside and saw his car, there was no response when we knocked on his bedroom door. We awoke the next morning to find the toilet spilling over, clogged by a mammoth, gruesome bowel movement. The case was pretty open-and-shut: any doubt surrounding the culprit’s identity was extinguished when we looked out the front window to see the car missing and the gate left open behind it.

The most we heard from him were occasional text messages reminding us that we needed to restock our shared hand soap or toilet paper.

Tenuous as it was, us Bhoys relished these spells of Pax Outeniqua, which brought the cessation of loitering, intrusions into personal space, and death metal shaking the walls of the house at all hours. I could use the television - and couch - to watch football on the weekends without having to work around the schedule of a resident exhibitionist, and Leslie could enjoy his food without having to share it while providing cuddles and emotional support. Fundi, meanwhile, could prepare for himself food or drink without a chaperone.

It turned out that this latest period was nothing more than a convalescence, during which the boy-king could get in some home-cooked meals and some wound-licking. We should have known that any victories we’d achieved thus far had been nominal as he retained, at all times, the trump card: his mother, who’d largely avoided the house over the year.

Even while Richard was on the lam, though, I had little faith that we were ever *truly* alone. My suspicions weren’t entirely

unfounded. I came back from class one afternoon to find a crew of boiler-suited African workmen climbing up into my closet. This, they said, was the only access point for the flat's attic; they'd been commissioned to do an emergency check on some electrical fittings or other. The details were immaterial; the only need-to-know information was that "it wasn't safe for me to be in the room," they said, as "they had live wires being brought in and out." I waited on the terrace. After a few hours, I heard them make their final fittings with their electric drills before folding up their aluminum ladders and emerging from the room. I ransacked my desk and cupboards, but could find no evidence of the nanny cam that I was sure had been installed.

As you can imagine, the constant threat of surveillance put something of a damper on our social lives. Although the apartment and its large terrace would have made for an ideal place to hangout, we were hesitant to invite any friends or potential love interests over to the house for fear of disaster.

22

SHOWDOWN

OR: THE APPLE DOESN'T FALL FAR

With the end of the academic year approaching, my roommates and I made our leaving arrangements. Naturally, the three of us who actually paid rent sought to schedule our exits for the earliest date possible. The lease said there was no issue insofar as we provided her a month's notice. We gave her double this, but she put up weeks of resistance nonetheless. After she grudgingly agreed to allow us to move out, our last few weeks were punctuated by her visiting unannounced to give tours of the apartment. Whenever I was left unsupervised with any prospective renters, I subtly suggested they continue their search elsewhere. Each time she did this, we reminded her that the lease said she needed to give us 48 hours' notice before entering the premises.

"Oh!" she'd say, each time acting more surprised than the last. "I mentioned to Richard I'd be stopping by - did he not pass the news on to the rest of you? He's such a silly boy."

One of her unexpected visits signaled the beginning of the grand finale, the culmination of a year's worth of abuses of power; the climax, if you will, of our captors' year-long, tantric dance in which the three of us had been unwittingly cast for supporting roles.

I'd returned from a run, and nobody else was home. I took a

shower and was in my room, naked, about to get dressed. At the last second, I heard the door to the terrace, which was right next to mine, slam closed. She wrenched my door open and stood in the doorway, her broad frame blocking it entirely. Luckily, I'd snatched my towel off the bed and could protect my modesty, if little else. She seemed unfazed:

"What are you doing here?"

"What do you mean what am I doing here? This is my room! Get out!"

She didn't move, other than to fold her arms across her chest.

"Well I own this house, so it's *my* room, technically. Why did nobody clean up? I have to give tours here today. I'll have to call them off until tomorrow."

"But you didn't tell us when you would be here. You have to give us warning."

"I can do whatever I want."

She glanced down to where I stood, and pointed at the trail of droplets which had fallen off me as I'd come in from the bathroom.

"If that water does any damage to the wood... So help me God. Don't you know how to use a towel? Do you need me to show you?"

So this was it. This is what the nanny cams had been set up to capture. What was it with this family and their fondness for half-naked, post-shower monkey business? The apple didn't fall far, apparently. Thankfully, the front door opened, and Fundi and a friend spilled into the hallway. Sue gave me one last up-and-down before spinning on her heels and marching away down the hall, leaving me to get dressed in peace.

The next day, we were informed that, before getting our deposits back upon moving out, we'd first be subject to a rigorous, itemized inspection. By this point, my roommates and I were intimately familiar with every page of our rental agreement. Nowhere was such an inspection mentioned. According to her, this didn't matter:

“It’s Common Law. I have the right to conduct a check.”

“Maybe, but you have nothing to compare it to, since you forgot to do that when we first moved in.”

“Why are you arguing with me? Your behavior is typical of tenants who have incurred damages they don’t want to be held accountable for. Do you have something to hide?”

Sue had her son conduct the sweep, the findings of which were sent a few days later. We’d been found guilty of:

- losing a fork and knife (the proof offered for this allegation was: “the cutlery came in a pack of 12,”)
- chipping a coffee mug (this had come in the same generic kitchen set sold by the nearby home goods store)
- breaking a handle on the refrigerator,
- seriously damaging the reclining wicker lounge chairs on the terrace outside.

I hoped it might have been possible to appease her without the three of us incurring any significant personal cost, and thus decided to play along as if any of this were in good faith. I messaged her back to say that the refrigerator handle was not technically “broken” as alleged; though some of the plastic did seem chipped, it was still perfectly functional. The seats outside, I conceded, had a few cracks in the wicker, but this was outdoor furniture for a student house, and therefore perfectly functional. Nevertheless, despite our having no recollection of losing the fork and knife, nor of chipping the mug, we were happy to contribute our share towards the purchase of a new set, such was our desire to end things amicably. She responded later that evening.

“It’s grand of you to be honest about the cutlery, but I’ll still be ordering a new handle for the fridge. The three tenants will split the cost. And, unless someone confesses to damaging the chairs, you’ll be paying to replace them.” Attached to her curt

message was the invoice for the handle; the website on which she found the replacement would charge almost \$300.

We had no idea which direction to turn. We called the university, but learned they only hosted the database on which this apartment had been advertised and had no connection to any specific landlord who used the site. They referred us to the national association for tenant rights, but the local office had no appointments available until well after we were scheduled to leave Cape Town. We had no recourse, no protections, no rights. We should have known this was a conflict not beholden to any modern rules; hell, one look at her spawn could have told us that. The governing code wouldn't be Geneva's, but Hammurabi's (an eye for an eye, and so on). I did some research, hoping to glean a better understanding of our opposition. Well oh well - there it was, in black and white. Rule 202: whoever strikes a man of higher rank will receive 60 blows with an ox-whip in public. It had only been verbal, but I *had* lashed out at her prince; our retribution would undoubtedly soon follow.

Regardless, I was galvanized. This was it: my chance to slow the march of racism and save the day. She had no idea how much free time I had; I'd finished my last coursework weeks ago, so my every waking second would now be devoted to proving our innocence. But if I was going to engage, I wanted to do it right: there could be no kicking myself post-argument for fluffing my lines in the heat of the moment or for not having a clever retort or data-point to hand. I did hours of research, trawling through hundreds of photographs and videos taken by myself and anyone I knew who had visited the house. I researched our fridge's specifications using the identification barcode I'd discovered inside its vegetable drawer. With this, I was able to track down an online copy of our specific model's manual. I found the part code for the little plastic strip and tried to find a replacement online, to no avail. In my research, however, I learned that, miraculously, the brand had an official showroom in downtown Cape Town; I called a taxi immedi-

ately. After describing my situation to the representative, he told me they ought to be able to provide me a new piece. He'd do his best to source it, he said, and get back in touch in due course. He called me that evening to offer the most spectacular example of concierge service I'd ever received.

"I've got good news and bad news," he said. "The shipping was going to take about six weeks. But I messaged my manager, who was at a trade show in Belgium - which also happens to be where we have our headquarters and main warehouse. As it turns out, he's flying back down to Cape Town tomorrow and can bring the piece with him in his luggage."

"That's amazing! Thank you."

He resumed, though his tone became sombre. "But I'm sorry, sir. Because of how our warranty system works, the bad news is I have to charge you for the piece."

Oh, no, I thought; So, this is how she wins - she's paid him off. And after we'd got so painfully close. The agent must have heard me wince as I asked him the damage.

"Let me check for you... Yes, here it is: the charges will come to... thirty-seven rand. Again, I'm very sorry."

Thirty seven rand was the equivalent of about two dollars. A miracle. They refused to let me leave some sort of gratuity or pay some share of the shipping charge when I collected the piece at the showroom. I went home and fixed the handle in just a few minutes. Sue could barely hide her disappointment as she tested the door during her next visit.

I invited her to the terrace to explain our side of the argument (which I'll relay in full, such is my self-satisfaction). I'd rehearsed for hours. This was my moment. The lounge chairs had been outside since before any of us had moved in and had remained there through the year. The thin plastic wicker, pulled taut over the chairs' right angles, had endured sun, rain, wind, and Richard's parties, where hot coals, guests, and other furniture had likely been spilled over it. Any of this could have caused these tiny cracks in the plastic. She didn't care.

“I don’t care. I bought these chairs brand new. They were in perfect condition before I moved them here.”

“But that’s impossible. I researched the brand - as it turns out, they went out of business a few years ago.”

“Well, what of it? Yes, I bought the chairs several years ago, but they were kept in our storage unit. So, when I had them brought here, they were still technically brand new. *You* need to replace the wicker - it isn’t meant to crack.”

“You’re wrong there, too. I called around to about ten furniture stores in the city and up and down the coast. I eventually managed to find someone who was a rep for the brand in the mid-2000s. He said that, because it’s been so long since they were made, the plastic would have started to weaken even if they were left unused. Apparently, you’d have been instructed to keep them under protective covers as often as possible, as the sun dries out the plastic; he also mentioned you would have been provided with a spray to keep it from splitting. Anyway, Leslie and I read through the South African Rental Housing Act, and there seems to be a provision for general wear and tear around the house - some amount is unavoidable, and we can’t be penalized. So I sent the rep pictures of the loungers, and had him confirm, in writing, that this is exactly what happens to them naturally.”

I’d turned the tide, but I couldn’t stop there, I had too much momentum.

“Regardless, the person who sat on that chair the most was your son, and he was always in his heavy work boots.” This was true: whenever he wasn’t in his silk (reserved solely for the boudoir, it seemed), he donned a uniform of jeans, a leather jacket, and steel-toed combat boots (all black). We’d come back from class to see him reclining on a lounge chair outside, boots on feet and beer in hand. Any time he needed to scoot up or down, he dug his heels into the wicker for purchase.

“Richard told me he’s never sat in these seats.”

“I have a picture of him sitting in one right here.” I showed her my phone. “By the way, if you’re so worried about furniture,

why haven't you brought up the chair in the dining room that he tore through while he was drunk with his friends?"

"He and I have already spoken about that - he denies he had anything to do with it. He doesn't know exactly who was in attendance that night, but we're trying to find out who was responsible. Anyway, that's none of your concern."

I'd done my best to stay calm, but my hands were shaking from the adrenaline.

"What do you mean, it's none of my concern? You've lied to us since the beginning. You didn't even make him show up for this meeting - how are we supposed to believe you'll hold him accountable?"

"How dare you. I'll have you know that Richard wanted to be here, but he's preparing for a job interview at a law firm. A law firm that helps refugees, by the way."

"I don't care where he is - *you* picked the time for this meeting. He's been free all week, hanging around the apartment. If you had wanted him to be a part of this, he'd be here."

She had already been growing red in the face, but the stress had now become too much for her cholesterol-clogged heart; she knew her only chance was to throw one last haymaker, a retort I would cherish forever:

"I used to have no problem with Americans, but I can see now that everything they say about you people is true. I'll never work with another of you again."

After she stormed out, I found myself beaming with pride. Her line, delivered with such theatrical venom, had clearly been rehearsed. I pondered what had been her exact tipping point. I'd never get the full answer; I could only speculate as to what, exactly, the gossip had been, what she had heard "everyone" say about "my" "people." *My people* - terrific! And what variety of discrimination was she promising to exhibit henceforth? Racial? Ethnic? Religious? Who cared: little old me had single-handedly ruined a middle-aged woman's perception of and tolerance for an entire nation - what a rush. Thinking back to Zimmer all those

years earlier, I now understood how intoxicating it was to inspire such profound hatred.

While I respected her conviction, I noticed a curious incongruity. Despite having lived through Apartheid South Africa (and therefore witnessed decades' worth of atrocities), this woman had somehow never developed any qualms about taking on the multiple Afrikaner tenants her son had so happily lived with (and exposed himself to) before. Surely, I thought, the previous government's actions ought to have warranted more animosity than *anything* I, a student in my early twenties who'd only interacted with her in person a handful of times, had done. As much as I'd have loved to have been personally responsible for souring someone's opinion of an entire country or race, the reality was probably far more simple: the "people" who made her uncomfortable were anybody who threatened her bottom line or upset her (or her son's) status quo.



The last time I spotted Dick was a week later. He'd been in hiding, but his mother sent him to collect our keys as each of us left the apartment for the last time. When he feigned ignorance regarding my latest clash with the house matriarch, I couldn't resist goading him.

"Hey Richard, I was disappointed you dodged our meeting with your mom; she wanted us to screw us for hundreds of dollars. I had to fight tooth and nail to stop her."

"Yeah, I disagreed with her on some of that."

"I've also been meaning to ask: you have a ton of left-wing political stuff in your room, but don't *real* lefties agree that landlords are pretty much the scum of the earth? How do you reconcile that, given the way your own mother treats people?"

"Well, it's difficult. I just try to stay out of the disputes."

"But you *didn't* stay out of it. You sold us down the river."

"If you really were a tenant just like us, you would have been

here to help argue our case. But you didn't show up because you knew you wouldn't have to pay like we did."

"Well, I've helped tenants before when she's done things like this."

"Really? Who? If *we* didn't seem worth your time, what the hell was she trying to do to the people you *did* help?"

"That was a student from Nigeria. In your case, I knew you guys had the means to pay for this stuff - it wouldn't have ruined you. We weren't expecting this to be so much drama."

"Wait a second. You thought it was worth trying to extort us because we might have been able to afford it? What's the deal here? You just go from house to house helping your mom screw students over and, in return, she lets you get away with being a pervert - do I have that right? You're almost 30, and you've now dropped out of three different graduate programs. How many more years can you guys keep this going?"

With these encounters out of the way, I could finally exhale. Still, on the balance of things, I couldn't delude myself into thinking I'd won this war outright. They'd inflicted far more than a year's worth of stress on the three of us. Given the imbalance of leverage, we were only ever able to be reactive, which limited our recourse to what was essentially damage control. That said, we were able to land a few crucial body blows which unsettled them just enough to let us limp over the finish line. This was, by any measure, a Pyrrhic victory. The university had also accepted me into its law program, but I'd opted out based on my experience as an undergraduate. I already struggled with being overly competitive; I didn't want to make being adversarial my day-job. Perusing legal documents for any possible exploitable loophole or oversight, and treating every conversation as an opportunity for cross examination, pouncing on inconsistencies, and omissions were exactly the things I needed a break from. Of course, I'd ended up trapped with a rich, spoiled lawyer with a penchant for public masturbation. The perfect crime. Or so Richard must have thought. I was the world-weary detective who'd reluctantly post-

poned his retirement so as to finish one last job. The emotional and physical toll, of course, would be hefty. But it was the right thing to do, for my roommates, members of protected classes such as they were.

I'd extracted my confession, but (to persist with the metaphor) it was inadmissible in court: the three of us had neither the time nor the inclination to get embroiled in any serious legal dispute - what damages could we really have sought, anyway? We sent an email to the office of housing, recommending that they ban the mother from advertising her properties on their database. Sometimes, though, it's just nice to see a bully squirm. Not a perfect ending, maybe, but it was the best one I could get.

23

RESPITE

I spent my last week in the country with three of my friends who'd flown in to visit from the US. The Garden Route seemed the best way to show them more of the country; I already felt like this stretch of coastline had given me (at minimum) a lifetime's worth of thrill, so I was eager to facilitate what I hoped would be equally memorable experiences for my friends. Our first stop, then, could only be Shark Island. I promised the guys they had no idea what they were in for. If their dive could be even half as exciting as my first two, it would be unforgettable.

We got to the dive company's headquarters and sat through the welcome meeting. Today, thankfully, we'd have access to the best boat, which had a viewing platform above the main deck allowing passengers a better view of the sharks (which would hopefully be) circling the cage. This suited me, as I'd caught a cold and had planned to ride out with my friends and provide moral support rather than diving myself. However, the crew told me as they fit the divers for wetsuits, no auxiliary passengers were allowed: if I wanted to join my friends, I had to pay full price. I argued that I'd brought them three paying customers and had, over my last two visits, forked over hundreds of dollars. But the crew had neither memory of me, nor (allegedly) any record of my

contributions to the Fund for Misunderstood Sharks. I conceded defeat, paying for my third submersion in as many visits to Mossel Bay.

We walked down towards the water, the captain chuckled as he saw me pointing out towards the island.

“Ha! We aren’t going to Shark Island today. Not even close.”

My stomach dropped - the island being just a few minutes’ ride away was the only reason I hadn’t been violently seasick on the past two trips. I tried to play it cool.

“Oh, interesting, okay. Where’s today’s island?”

“There’ll be no island for us today, but there’s a spot further out in the bay where we’ve had some luck over the past couple of weeks. We’ve had some orcas in the region over the past couple of months. They’re one of the only animals these sharks are scared of, so a lot of the great whites ran away. Luckily, we tracked most of them and found a few who still patrol the coast.”

None of this had been disclosed before we’d forked over our money. I was desperate not to reveal my concern to my friends, for whom I felt responsible. They’d traveled thousands of miles to see me and, in my sales pitch convincing them to visit, their survival had been implied.

The ride out to the secret dive location was dreadful; I’ve never been more seasick in my life. Our route was circuitous and erratic, as if we really *were* trying to lose a tail. It didn’t help that the previous days had been stormy, the water still choppy and distressed. The sky, troubled in its own right (low, dense, heavy, only a slightly lighter shade of pewter than the water), worsened matters by obfuscating the horizon and offered us no relief, no reassurance, pressing us into the water. For the first fifteen minutes we hugged the coastline, passing Shark Island before heading outwards to the open sea. The rocks lingered behind us for a time before disappearing into the fog as we lost sight of the mainland behind us. We hadn’t checked the exact time we’d set off, but I estimated we’d spent almost two hours on the rickety vessel (which had looked far sturdier back at the port), most of

which I spent doubled over its side while trying not to vomit. Worse, I wasn't even left to suffer in peace: about half of the group was struck down by nausea of their own. While the other divers formed a line and took turns to expel their continental breakfasts, I refused to look up from my white knuckles and the chrome railing.

After an hour or so (which felt like nine), we drifted to a stop and dropped anchor in the open ocean, the nearest land only a sliver. This was unsettling, as it gave the feeling we were more vulnerable than we'd been on my previous dives, during which we'd been much closer to shore (or at least the Island). Any sense of security had, of course, been spurious - we couldn't have reached either of those in the event of emergency, but the land's proximity had provided some sort of placebic calm. Today though, I was so nauseated that getting into the freezing, murky water was a relief.

Normally, in your five- or ten-minute turn in the cage, the local sharks approach the boat once or twice a minute, a hit-rate I had assured my friends of (and promised would be more than exciting enough). We waited as long as we could, but, whether they'd decimated the great white population or scared them off, it seemed the orcas had won: only one measly shark risked associating with us, this one much thinner and shorter than the ones I'd seen before. She circled the boat a few times, warily inching closer, before stalling her approach about five meters away. She lingered just long enough to have a slurp of tuna chum before slinking off into the dark. Anticlimactic as the dive was, it was far more tolerable than spending another second on the boat. Unfortunately, there was no option but to suffer for another hour and a half on our return to shore, with something feeling like acute hypothermia now accompanying my paralyzing nausea.



The next day, we had a half-day safari planned which I was hoping would restore high morale. But while we were en route the next morning, the game reserve called to tell me there'd been an error with my reservation: our tickets had been canceled and the seats already filled by other visitors. Our only other option, the woman said, was the sunset safari, though this was more expensive.

Thankfully, the upcharge amounted to just a few extra dollars, and I signed us up. I didn't know what to expect, as I hadn't seen information for any such expedition on their website. It turned out, however, that after dozens of bureaucratic errors and miscommunications costing me countless hours of time and thousands of dollars to resolve, one of these mishaps had finally worked in my favor.

As we climbed into our seats, Innocent loaded a large crate into the storage boot at the back of the vehicle. "Can't forget the snacks!"

"We're going to feed the animals?"

He laughed. "No, no. These are for you!"

Two other tour groups had dropped out, which meant my friends and I shared the vehicle with just a middle-aged couple and their young son who sat in the back and kept to themselves. Towards the front of the truck, we kept up a running conversation with Innocent as we drove off into the reserve. He was terrifically knowledgeable about each of the reserve's species on a biological level, while also totally familiar with even their individual behavior. On some days, he told us, certain giraffes or rhinos were much harder to find or even avoided the humans altogether. But that afternoon we were able to see even the more reclusive species because we were in a smaller truck and thus could more easily traverse the treacherous trails of barely planed rock and dirt.

After touring for about two hours, Innocent swung us around a hairpin turn and we climbed out of a narrow gorge, where we'd been watching a family of elephants graze. We arrived on the highest point of the reserve, a plateau whose tussocks of

waist-high grasses fed small herds of springbok and zebra. In the distance were the Outeniqua mountains, rising much further into the sky than these foothills, spanning the northern horizon. Innocent parked the truck and walked around to open the boot. He passed us a few thick blankets for us to unroll on the ground and some smaller ones to drape over ourselves, as it was crisp in the late afternoon, especially up on this plain, and the temperature was dropping as the sun got lower. He popped another large compartment in the trunk to reveal a mini bar. This was all included in the drive, he told us, so we could help ourselves. We enjoyed several rounds of drinks while taking in our surroundings, the animals grazing peacefully and regarding us with curiosity of their own.

To mingle with the wildlife on this high, remote plain was thrilling. My friends had graciously used almost their entire year's-worth of holiday, so I'd been desperate to help them create their own unique connection to this far-flung place where I'd become so attached. We weren't quite in the bush, of course, but this was as close as we could get. The main lodge was a few kilometers away and completely out of sight, and there was no fencing, roads, nor any other evidence of humans but for a lone powerline suspended above the wheat gold of the plateau. The wire, a silvery thread against the forbidding backdrop of the mountains, traversed for a kilometer or so before dipping out of sight in the northeast.

As it got darker, I asked Innocent about the whereabouts of the reserve's lions. I tried to sound casual, not bringing up what I'd learned a few years earlier about their night vision (or, for that matter, their mating habits). Thankfully, we were safe: the lions, he said, were in a separate segment of the park.

Eventually, it was time to make our way back to the lodge. Not wanting to waste the open bar, I suggested we mix some drinks for the road. In a rush, I poured us each several glugs of Amarula, a delicious liqueur. Whether due to the dark or my buzz, I started pouring before realizing (Big) Al and I still had

about half of our gin and tonics remaining. But it was too late, Innocent had packed up and started the vehicle, so we clambered in with our cocktails. The family now sat in the front, so we foolishly chose the back row. Expecting the worst, we tasted our concoctions, but were pleasantly surprised; it seemed the contrasting ingredients had found a tenuous equilibrium whereby the gentle vibration of the all-terrain vehicle had rendered for us a kind of smoothie. But this lasted for only a few seconds, whereupon the truck lurched to a start in the direction of the main lodge. As we rumbled along, Al looked down into his brass goblet.

“Oh, that’s weird. What happened to our drinks? It’s like they’ve curdled or something.”

He was right: the gravelly rumbling had agitated our cocktails to disastrous effect. Their ingredients had totally coagulated, with thick globules now swimming in a beige, milky bile (which looked eerily similar to the swill we’d soaked ourselves in while shark-spotting). I looked ahead, and the headlights revealed we were still on the relatively flat grassland - the treacherous ravines were yet to come, but my generous bartending had left our cups brimming precariously.

Sure enough, we violently pitched downward seconds later to access the trail that snaked down through the valley. Innocent, perhaps a NASCAR or Formula 1 enthusiast, seemed to relish taking this challenging circuit in the dark; now that we had no sightseeing to accommodate, we went much faster than we had on the first leg. Without seatbelts or friction to restrain us, centrifugal force smashed us into each other as we hurtled around the hairpin turns. The cheap, slippery vinyl seats offered no purchase. The back row, as we ought to have learned from countless school bus rides, is hypersensitive; we were bucked into the air by every pothole and welt. At first, just our hands were splattered with the creamy paste, but our forearms soon followed. Before long, our shirts and laps were drenched too, but we’d stopped caring and were in hysterical laughter as we succumbed theatrically to the truck’s every whim. We eventually got back to camp

and walked through the main hall, which triggered another wave of cackling as we imagined how we must have looked: the two of us with the cocktails had spent the drive clinging to each other and vomiting into each other's laps, while the other two had remained silent, evidently perfectly content with staying in the splash zone of their friends' vomit.



We hurtled towards the pit of one valley, where a narrow, coursing stream wound through beach-ball sized boulders and skirted around a dense grove of low vegetation. Innocent lurched us to a halt on the wobbly wooden footbridge

“If we're very lucky,” Innocent whispered, “we'll see one of our new arrivals.”

The light had faded, and the rocks, trees, and undergrowth had all sunk into shades of murky brown. Unless the new arrival was wearing a lit headlamp, the odds of us being able to make it out were slim. But from somewhere behind the bushes, a miniature rhinoceros trotted out confidently, followed closely behind by an adult variant. This was lovely to see, especially after the heartrending backstory Greg and I had heard on my first game drive. I knew better than to ask Innocent anything about the rhinos, including how many now inhabited the park. The man in the front row had apparently missed this memo, and I was pleased to see Innocent adopt that first guide's same coyness, intentionally misunderstanding the man's inquiry.”

“How many rhinos are there? Well, as you can see, there's two.” He gave the group a smirk, before turning back towards the animals.

For its own safety, the size of the herd would remain a mystery.



The four of us drove back to Cape Town, or mood buoyed by our expedition into the wild. The safari drives I had done before, though enjoyable, had lacked this crucial element. Not the congealed slop, that is, nor the non-traditional rhino family, but the intimacy with nature, no matter how fleeting or contrived it may have been. This isn't counting our being stranded miles off shore amid the orcas, of course. Private, exclusive experiences *are* entirely possible, of course, if inconvenient. You could hire a lone guide, for example, to take you into the heart of Kruger Park to track a cheetah, but this would be horribly costly in terms of time and money - especially so for students.

Back in the city the next day, my feeling was reaffirmed as we hiked Lion's Head. This climb is a critical item on the agenda of any visitor, and understandably so: the mountain is perfectly situated, offering stunning panoramic views over the Ocean, cape, or the city and beyond. Access to the trail is free, and it's a relatively easy climb. Good weather on a given day sees hundreds or even thousands of hikers summit and descend, navigating each other as much as the terrain. Any large branches and roots growing near the single-lane path are used as hand and footholds, rendering the wood more slippery and shining than any combination of sandpaper and varnish could.

The pinched summit, rising to almost 700 meters above sea level, is high enough to provide the illusion of separation from civilization: any humans down below are barely visible, and sound from the city does not reach the summit, muffled by the wind and the static of the Atlantic waves that pummel the surrounding coastline. But the developed world soon reminds us of its inevitability. Towards sunset, I began to notice a frenzied buzzing loud enough to carry over the wind, consistent in pitch but increasing in volume as more hikers gathered at the summit. This was no swarm of angered bees, however, nor any other insect, in fact, but rather a dozen or so electric drones, controlled by their owners via cell phones or remote controls. Several of the machines hovered directly above, uncannily motionless, like birds of prey

riding a thermal, while others had been sent out on various orbits above the summit. Behind us, Table Mountain rose another 400 meters above. I wondered whether we might have escaped these gadgets had we ventured one peak higher (incidentally, we would have: they're banned).

Before dark, your eye is drawn to the concrete lodge situated on the nearest corner of its plateau. From here, thick steel cables run from the upper lodge to the company's headquarters closer to the base of the slope, just below you on the side of the city bowl. Large gondolas run every few minutes, ferrying people to the summit and back. Operations continue until an hour after dark to accommodate the sunset photographers and the dinner rush: at the peak's plateau, a few hundred square meters have been paved to provide a foundation for a few gift shops, bathrooms, and a large dining hall. Also joining the mealtime rushes are the dassies who, in their ones and twos, tentatively approach anyone sitting at the edges whom they suspect has a few extra potato chips or pieces of trail mix to spare. Their hunches are usually rewarded.

A rebuttal to my grouchiness would likely include an appeal to our species social needs, perhaps suggesting we ought to open our minds to celebrate such a beautiful sunset or trail with even *more* beautiful strangers. And so on. I'll grant that many of the city and the Garden Route's offerings still manage to be impressive and immensely enjoyable even amid throngs of tourists, and that most inconveniences faced at these sites are trivial, mainly just exercises of patience: waiting for people to get out of your way or to stop blocking your view.

Regardless, I found myself wary of this "more the merrier" angle, as it feels too close for comfort to the logic of the guy who brings his guitar to a party uninvited: "What, you don't like music? Who doesn't like music? Don't be a party pooper!" You give an inch, they'll take a mile. On that note, (and while the window to rattle off petty grievances remains ajar), I also believe that the able-bodied ought to climb Table Mountain - even just *once* - before they take the gondola up. Along with terrific views,

its plenitude of trails (the easiest of which only takes about an hour - come on, you can do it!) dilute the crowds and offer a more rewarding experience.

Believe it or not, my issue isn't with tourists in particular (although I can't deny having wished those drones would kamikaze their owners). As someone who wants these same experiences for myself, I'm a hypocrite - indeed, quite a selfish one. If it were up to me, I'd have unfettered private access to any of these parks according to my whim. But perhaps this was a moot point; I'd been reminded on countless occasions to be wary of secluded areas, even those near the city. At the entrance of every hike or park, staff at the entrance or other visitors made sure to notify me that there'd been several instances of disturbing crime in the nearby area recently, or that muggers liked to target these areas given the lack of potential witnesses.

If total tranquility and solitude in nature is an unrealistic expectation, then, perhaps we might compromise, and consider natural wonders serene by default. We ought to have the choice to opt out of being filmed by seven drones, captured in dozens of selfies and videos, and soundtracked by music blaring from a speaker being lugged up the mountain by someone a few meters ahead of us on a trail. Admittedly, the man running up Lion's Head in an inflatable dinosaur costume was a hilarious sight - so too, on a different occasion, was the group in full-body gorilla suits. But, still...

At any rate, for just a few hours on our little safari drive, we got to experience what life would be like in my Goldilocks world. As proof of my equanimity, I'll even concede that having the small family along with us was perfectly tolerable.



On their last day, my friends and I went for a hike along the ridge above Camp's Bay. Afterwards, we decided to stop for a well-earned drink at a hillside pub across the road from the trailhead

before going home. Before the waitress arrived to take our orders, I ran to the bathroom, which was just beyond an outdoor seating area overlooking the city bowl. A couple was sitting at one of the tables, and as I walked past I instantly recognized a nasally Australian accent: it was Teddy's, the volunteer for whose date I'd helped rehearse. I didn't bring this up in front of his current boyfriend. He hadn't been back here since that trip, he said, and was just visiting for a week or so before going home.

Impelled by nostalgia, I returned to Muizenberg for the first time since my first stint in the country five years earlier, where I walked along the town's beach promenade, about the length of a city block.

One by one, the familiar places: the laundry owned by the two old colored ladies where I'd brought my dirty clothes, balancing a full contractor bag between the handles of my bike on the wobbly ride across town. As useful as the bike had been to shuttle me safely around the neighborhood, it had had no shock absorption, and the jarring of its hard plastic handlebars gave me deep bone bruises in the heels of my hands which remained sore months after I'd left. Before leaving, I had ended up giving the bike to the girl downstairs to whom Greg had prematurely donated it. I wondered if she'd been made to suffer as I had.

Over there was the spot in the sand where a friend I had set out our towels on a beach visit. I had bought a pair of cheap beach flip-flops earlier that day and, when I came back from a five-minute swim, I saw they'd been stolen.

Next, the surf shop where I'd paid for my first - and only - surfboard rental. I'd been inspired by a small class of wet-suited black kids idling offshore. They sat astride their small boards, legs dangling into the water. When they sensed the next wave would produce a suitable barrel, they quickly lay forward to paddle into position. As soon as they got purchase, they deftly sprung to their feet and sliced artfully along the inner face of the wave as it broke behind them and carried them to shore. Some used the tube as a ramp, turning quickly upwards and letting their momentum

shoot them airborne where they'd perform a spin or flip before effortlessly rejoining the wave.

The rental agent had offered a discount on a lesson with an instructor, but I'd erroneously believed the kids weren't doing anything I couldn't teach myself by trial and error in my half-hour time slot. I barely even made it to the water. I struggled to tame my beginner's board, which in my defense was about twice my height and acted as a mainsail, repeatedly plowing me over into the sand as it caught the offshore breeze. The agent had told me not to bother with smaller waves, as they lacked momentum and would, counterintuitively, be more difficult to catch as a beginner. I paddled out and tried riding a few waves but soon gave up on trying to stand, opting to just use my ungainly ark as a boogie board. Even then, the massive waves repeatedly knocked me into the water and tumbled me through pummeling spin cycles on their way to shore. I quit after 20 minutes, as I was terrified of the huge, cumbersome slab of plexiglass to which I was leashed by the ankle; there was little doubt I would come off the worse when our paths inevitably crossed.

I then saw the Indian restaurant where the Soul Sisters had congregated on their charismatic leader's last evening, and the food market one street further back where the volunteers had gathered every Friday evening to try samples of various South African and international dishes from the various stalls.

Across the road, the train tracks, running perpendicular to the boardwalk and south along the peninsula. These had carried me to the tennis club in Fish Hoek. The last time I'd gone, I'd been detained on the way there by two very stern, very portly security officers as I tried to leave the little station. They hauled me to a boxy interrogation room whose tiny, lone window up towards the low ceiling was screened by chicken wire. I'd failed to buy the right type of ticket, they said, and I now faced having to pay the requisite fine or be charged with a criminal offense. They wore combat boots and hi-vis orange vests over khaki army jumpsuits. The man - colored, gray-haired, mustachioed - paced the room.

His female colleague blocked the door, slapping a wooden ruler against her palm threateningly. After letting the tension build, he squared up to me and announced my punishment: a fine, the equivalent of five dollars. If I knew what was good for me, I'd cough up and skedaddle. I obliged.

A few miles further along those tracks was the town to which my fellow egg-throwing roommates and I had ridden during my last couple of days. We'd seen a brochure advertising a paintball battlefield and decided to sign up. We were placed on the same team, which was unfortunate for the German, as I'm sure he would have taken great pleasure in putting a few rounds into his Hawaiian bully. A low-budget script-writer's dream: "Say '*Guten Tag*' (or 'Aloha') to my little friend!"

Finally, the internet café where I'd watched that lone tennis match, though what I really remembered from that afternoon was the scene at that table next to mine. I peered inside. There, to my amazement, were the very same father and son, sitting at the exact table they'd shared years before. The dad was wearing the same spectacles, and looked healthy, albeit his hair, previously a dark brown, had surrendered to those flecks of gray that'd only been testing the waters when I first saw him. The son had grown but still looked to be a year or two away from needing to shave. From outside on the pavement, they looked comfortable in each other's presence and seemed to share an affectionate rapport; the son was animated, telling a story between spoonfuls of ice cream, with his dad hanging on every word.



ACT THREE
ON REFLECTION



24

HAPPY ENDING (?)

Though I'd left to carry on with my haphazard navigation of the world, life in this sleepy suburb had gone on; these men, too, had lived through the last half decade. What pivotal decisions had they made? What hardships had *they* endured? From what I could tell, they looked happy, healthy, and relaxed; making the best of their family's new chapter. Things might have turned out differently for them than what they'd expected, but that didn't make their happiness any less real, any less valid - and who was to say; they might be all the stronger for having come through a period of turmoil.

Forgiveness, reconciliation, rebuilt trust, salvaging a positive outcome from unlikely circumstances.

Narrative-wise, they'd made my job pretty easy. But what about their country? Ideally, there was a nice little bow I could put on that side of things, too. (What - you thought I'd wrap things up without playing the hits? Come on; if you emerge from the heart of darkness *without* proclaiming that a new dawn is just over the horizon, did you really even go?)

Alas, the last few years didn't appear to have been nearly as formative for South Africa as they'd been for my long-lost friends.

Mandela, the country's moral lighthouse, was long gone; in

the resulting power vacuum, inflammatory rhetoric and populism had rushed in. So too had migrants, who are undeterred by the country's troubles; after all, compared to much of central and sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa is a veritable paradise. Cape Town and Johannesburg stand to balloon in population over the coming decades, which will add stress to already incapable infrastructure. But the country had been sleepwalking towards failed state status for years before Mandela's death (and my arrival - not that the two events were linked in any way, at least to my knowledge), with its leaders seemingly happy to oversee a managed decline of the human systems they ought to have been strengthening so long as their own positions of wealth and power continued to consolidate.

In short: with the fall of apartheid imminent, the Guptas, a family of Indian plutocrats arrived, spotting what promised to be a rich vein for profiteering. They understood that regime change would necessitate new institutions and systems, and got into the gold rush on the ground level. Their man on the inside was Zuma, the upstanding fellow mentioned earlier who took a shower so as to lower his risk of catching HIV. I know what you're thinking - there's no way anyone got one over on *that* guy. The best bet is that he was more concerned with accumulating power than wealth (not that wealth wasn't a priority, too) and was therefore more than happy to let the Guptas (for whom wealth and undue influence were the main objectives) take the lion's share of any profits so long as they helped him climb the political ladder.

Over time, the country's institutions were infiltrated - and eventually overrun - by increasingly inept and self-serving actors. A vicious cycle, it turned out, as these actors further disregarded (or flat-out crippled) regulation and oversight. Those in power were no longer white segregationists (which was pretty much the only criteria), but they may as well have been, such was their disregard for the welfare of their long-suffering population. While the ANC and its cadres got rich, the rest of the country - including its infrastructure, its institutions, its people and their hope - was run

into the ground. It was years before any official criminal investigation was undertaken. By the time the bubble was burst (the needle came in the form of the Zondo commission, assembled to ascertain the extent of government corruption under Zuma): billions of taxpayer and consumer dollars had been misappropriated - and laundered - never to be seen again. Power, transportation, telecommunications, internal revenue, law enforcement, defense; no piece of the pie was left unsullied by the fingers of avarice. Ironically, even South African Airways, who operated my first flight into the country (during which, of course, I'd first heard about the country's rampant corruption) was also implicated, and had needed to declare bankruptcy after years of being run at a significant loss.

When I'd left for the first time, I'd taken comfort in the notion that the only way was up. But maybe I'd been wrong: bouncing along rock bottom has a cost of its own. It wasn't for lack of trying on our part: billions of foreign aid dollars had been pumped in even just since my first visit. But those dollars didn't look to have bought much progress. I'd shown up here (and into general consciousness, I guess) after apartheid, but it was difficult to imagine living conditions back then could have been much worse. Load-shedding power outages were increasingly common. And the townships didn't appear to have shrunk. Any evolution, if it had occurred, had been in my perception of them: they were no less depressing, but I'd certainly become desensitized. Perhaps this is, at scale, what happens over the years: the unconscionable gradually becomes conscionable. When would we confront the possibility that the well has been poisoned? That the damage wrought by the post-apartheid cocktail of unpreparedness, ineptitude, and rent-seeking might be irreparable? What might the future hold?



One outcome could be that the country goes nuclear - figuratively, that is (although an overhaul to the power grid would surely be worth a try), in the form of a political experiment. The rising tide (the one that was supposed to raise all boats) has not arrived, and far-left parties have started to spread the word, with some success. But calls for radical change have not been particularly diplomatic.

If one does manage to mobilize, a pro-worker, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist - and *embittered* - revolutionary party would be a nuisance, albeit one for which the West has, historically, relied on a pretty reliable modus operandi to foil (see: Latin America, the Congo, Iran, et. al.). But the golden years of unimpeachable immunity (and plausible deniability) for the CIA and FBI as they bravely silenced irksome upstarts in the second and third world have passed; if enough South Africans decide that their country can't move forward without radical overhaul, there might not be much we can do to stop it - by force at least.

Thankfully, from the West's perspective, the ANC likely wouldn't cede power easily. To ward off the guillotines being brought to bear (or at least buy themselves some time), South Africa's elites might consider following countries like Angola, Egypt, and Ethiopia, embracing the spirit of the global market and opening their doors fully to foreign investment.

But doing so would put them at risk of becoming, in our estimation, yet another Chinese vassal state: any cash injection would likely arrive in the form of Yuan - and not without strings. (And our hackles are already up; during my time in Stellenbosch, China had established a military base in Djibouti, further strengthening its foothold on the continent. Just what were these Chinese playing at? Who do they think they are? *Us?*) If at all possible, we'd put the kibosh on such a plan - and, ideally, nip their burgeoning relationship in the bud altogether.

Don't fret: officially, America doesn't have any official enemies anymore (outside the Middle East and Pyongyang). The Cold War's over, the wall fell - haven't you seen? There's chunks

of it everywhere! Even so, we'll stick to sleeping with one eye open, thank you very much. Unnecessary? Perhaps. Alarmist? Sure. But remember: it's not paranoia if they're out to get you. Better to act accordingly. Which, in this case, would mean steering the impressionable South Africans away from any insidious influence. Our stated objective would be to rescue our African buddies from being lured in by the allure of free enterprise, only to be requisitioned as nothing more than a pawn in another global proxy war; no longer ruled by an authoritarian, nationalist party *in situ*, maybe, but now a foreign one.

In reality, the last thing America wants is for the news to get out that, contrary to our proclamations, democracy might *not* be a prerequisite for capitalism, as proven, to our dismay, by our Chinese friends, whose version of capitalism seemed able to hold its own just fine without relying on our Democratic Ideals. Not a great look for our Freedom Agenda. To this end, we desperately want South Africa, as a case study of a fledgling democracy, to sort itself out; we have a vested interest in making sure the populations of countries like theirs aren't poor and unhappy (it's a tragedy, for us, that there are millions of potential consumers being squandered).

For now, then, we'll leave the South Africans to it, but watch on anxiously, holding out hope that their hand, though it's been squandered of late, might not be as bad as it's been made to look. Look on the bright side: the mere fact that there are billions to steal and millions of people to mistreat indicates that the country has the resources, land, and the latent labor-force to achieve economic stability and, eventually, geopolitical relevance without risking its hard-won independence.

Without a governmental exorcism first, however, the chances of any cash influx (of any currency) ending up in capable, well-meaning hands are slim.

There was, in name, at least, new management. Cyril Ramaphosa had taken over for Jacob Zuma and had brought with him a professed desire to crack down on government malfeasance.

But Ramaphosa was another ANC careerist who'd made his millions in the post-Apartheid privatization boom. Would he really have the inclination - let alone the testicular fortitude - to tear down the systems that allowed him to reach the top?

Regardless - ambitious goals are commendable, but you're only as strong as your systems; concurrent with the country's material deterioration has been the decay of cultural access and comprehension of basic individual rights. Societal erosion not only denatures the working class's access to the economy, but its faith in institutions, and its interest in learning the rights afforded to them by their constitution. As such, whether the polity has the tools to identify and resist oppressive forces from *within* its borders - let alone beyond them - is in doubt. Might there, perhaps, be some kind of learned impotence at play? The parable of the elephant and the rope comes to mind; its will has been broken; its perception of the world - and its own potential - is entombed. It won't (or can't) recalibrate. What's the extent of the psychological damage?

For now, the specter of apartheid lingers, keeping the waters of discourse muddied, and remaining the socially-accepted justification for the country's malaise. It's said that you can't forgive what you can't punish, and white people, in the eyes of many, have been allowed to get away with apartheid scot-free. The Truth and Reconciliation commission, organized while Mandela was still president, succeeded in bringing to light some *truth* regarding the extent of apartheid-era crimes, but didn't make much headway when it came to reconciliation; its main aim was fact-finding and forgiveness, rather than retribution. It's true that those calling for people to move on and stop crying over spilt milk are usually the people who did the spilling, but it's also true that a country cannot hope to provide opportunity and essential services for its people if it is in a perpetual state of civil war - ideologically or materially. And what if valid grief and frustration are being alchemized into anger by and for the benefit of a tiny minority of bad-faith actors?

Let's say that a decade passes and the AIDS, poverty, and unemployment rates are all still close to 50%. What about five decades? A century? Will those dying still be dying chiefly just because of apartheid? Or will a plurality of the blame finally fall at the feet of their leaders?

Specific answers aren't going to come from the ANC; it's hardly in the interest of those profiting from the status-quo to rock the boat. But the West isn't in any rush to pull at that thread, either. Were such a point to be crossed, we'd find ourselves in the unsavory position of needing to admonish a fellow democratic government (and participant in the free market), something we'd like to avoid.



And we, too, the bleeding-hearted individuals, might still feel the urge to help kick their can down the road: "*Of course* stability has not yet been reached - and it's our fault! We crippled their means of becoming self-sustaining. We not only razed and burned - hell, we salted the earth!"

But this reveals our ignorance: we, in the West, are taught to believe that other races and ethnicities are ideological and intellectual monoliths, each of whose members share the exact same [primitive] values and [regressive] sensibilities. If we've wronged one of them, we've wronged all of them; we thus owe each of them equal supplication, equal apology. This is not only infantilizing, but patently falsifiable: there have, by now, been dozens of perfectly (to wit: Ivy League) educated and wealthy people in positions of power in South Africa who should, by *any* Western standard of ethics or law, have "known better," and who have subsequently capitalized on racial tension for their own gain.

One of the more notable examples of this was the deployment of the "White monopoly capital" argument, a term championed by Zuma (more specifically, and apropos, his almost entirely white public relations team) to deflect from accusations against him by

insinuating that the country's *real* enemy was not its corrupt government but actually the cabal of white South Africans who still hoarded an outsized share of the country's capital. By playing this inflammatory card, Zuma (and the Guptas) bought themselves some time.

An unfortunate outcome of our frantic desire to show solidarity combined with our lack of understanding and dearth of opportunities to effect meaningful change is that the best we can come up with is scolding, naming and shaming, and tattling on each other; dismissing each other's complaints as "first world problems," and so on. This has become its own economy. The point is, it won't do us - nor the people on whose behalf we think we're fighting - any good to try and make ourselves feel or look better by belittling fellow luxury-havers and competing to see who can be the most outraged. Besides, it's all very easy for us to hold our luxury beliefs when our lives don't stand to change one way or the other.

We therefore must resist the call - well-meaning though it may be - to blindly proselytize our Noble Truths. What we feel to be acts of solidarity and allyship might serve to perpetuate bitterness and tribalism, or even enable violence. As those praised for their intelligence will struggle to navigate the world, so too will those taught to believe that they have drawn the short straw and that they ought to be angry about it - this applies to all of us.



I'll stress, again, that our uselessness isn't all our fault; our understanding of what human life ought to look like has been corrupted. We, in our strange little bubble, have cranked our hedonic treadmill up to maximum speed, and as a result can now no longer make sense of anything else.

From up in our crow's nest, poverty has become a binary distinction: you're either with us or far, far, below. From an angle this steep, it's impossible for us to relativize what's happening on

lower rungs; it all looks pretty much the same (to wit: horrific). To our eyes, not having a car is unthinkable, as is the prospect of reverting back to an iPhone model from five or six years ago. And don't even mention access to Wi-Fi. Those of us born after the Cold War have borne witness to unprecedented advancement and adoption of technology - it's all we know. But we need to accept that the exponential speed at which we've seen technology evolve and proliferate is an aberration.

More importantly, just because *we've* lost all perspective doesn't mean the rest of the world has. Within what we see as a homogenous category ("Poverty") are actually crucial nuances: to someone who walks an hour each way for water, acquiring a bike which would let them make the journey in 5 minutes would be life-changing. Pound for pound, this upgrade provides more utility and happiness than if we swapped that bike out for a motorcycle. This would still be an upgrade, of course, but would be proportionally less life-changing than going from foot to bike. Alas, because we've lost the ability to fathom a life without our unprecedented degree of luxury, we'd still see the bike man's situation (given his lack of motorcycle or car) as a travesty.

It's nearly impossible for us to imagine that what we see as bad now could be, and *is*, much, much better, than its historical equivalent. Just a few centuries ago, almost the entirety of the global population lived in conditions which, today, we'd measure as cruelest, most abject levels of poverty on earth. The percentage of those enduring such conditions today is down to less than ten (and still dropping). For instance, only a fraction of Americans have any idea that global poverty isn't getting worse. And it's not like it's just flatlining, by the way: it's almost halved over the last two decades or so (as has malnourishment). If you told us South Africa would be fine, but it would take 200 years, would we be patient enough to accept that? Or do we want our gratification *now*?

Along with this, most of us can't really conceive of other places being able to achieve happiness without first acquiescing to

our systems and values. It's incomprehensible that another country might provide its citizens with an equal or better quality of life - some of our NATO allies we'll allow, begrudgingly. But nowhere else. We might say we can, but we can't *really* wrap our heads around the idea that someone being middle class in, say, Bangladesh, might have an equal or better chance of having a happy life than a poor person in Kentucky. Moreover, our belief that there's a clear delineation between the haves and have-nots - and that any such list would be neatly organized by country or region - is itself erroneous.

These misapprehensions, encouraged by a panic-mongering media whose only goal is to keep your attention (so that you'll watch their intermittent pharmaceutical ads), make us susceptible to the belief that other places must see their circumstances with as much disgust as we do. And this, in turn, precipitates existential pessimism - how could it not?

Unfortunately, our fixation on the negatives, though it may be our natural tendency and the fashionable thing to do, means that we overlook some pretty immutable truths. For as much suffering and strife as there seems to be, for as overwhelming as the issues plaguing the human population may seem, this is, statistically, the best time ever to have been wrenched from the void and brought into the world. Almost every cause of human suffering has been eradicated, or vastly reduced. We take these advancements for granted, of course; we also assume that our steps forward have been uniform or instantaneous. They haven't. Centuries - if not millennia - have traditionally been required for upgrades to the quality of human life to catch on.

Our self-aggrandizement has also been disastrous for our sense of cosmic morality: because we believe that we are the protagonists of the universe, this leaves us vulnerable to and uniquely unqualified to cope with disaster when it strikes - whether or not it affects us directly. The drawback to us being the authors of our own destiny and, simultaneously, dependent on instant gratification is that we aren't provided with the means to

reconcile how anything bad could happen to those who we adjudge to be undeserving. We've deluded ourselves into thinking that "you can do everything right and still lose" is just quitter-talk. *That may be true in your case, fella, but not mine.*

Alas, bad things happening to "undeserving" things is the default condition of life on earth. What we fallaciously personify as "bad" luck is not the exception, but the rule, not only for our species but for every other that has ever existed - the past tense is used pointedly here; 99% of all species in history are now extinct. Bad things, as we'd define them today - dying from an infected tooth, an ingrown toenail, or cholera, or almost any other cause of premature death - have accounted for almost every death ever. Avoidable death (when viewed in retrospect, that is) is the only reason any of us are even alive today. Most of our billions of ancestors have died from diseases, poisons, and accidents which, today, could easily have been cured or prevented entirely.

But (if it helps us cope with our species-level survivor's guilt,) even the lucky today won't be spared. We, too, the people to whom good things have happened, will eventually be looked back on with a piteous curiosity by our distant descendants. In just a few hundred years, even those luxuries afforded only to the world's wealthiest will be seen as hilariously primitive and inhumane; not to mention how fascinating it'll be that half of us got diagnosed with cancer and that our average life expectancy was only two digits long. It will boggle their minds that the supposedly privileged and educated gave their children unlimited access to the internet; or that we gave our *adults* unlimited access to the internet - or to cigarettes, or whatever carcinogen or toxic chemical they'll discover. And of course our descendants will, somewhere even *further* down the line, come to seem just as gormless as we will. Bad luck is just a matter of which time scale you want to use: your odds of lasting more than half a century are way higher now than if you were conceived even by the noblest of families 200 years ago. No matter how many enslaved people you owned, how cushy your life was, you were just as likely as anyone else to

die from, say, dysentery. We could therefore argue that it was a “bad” thing to be born at almost any other point in human history other than the last few decades. No other species is forced to live with this pathos but us; it’s part and parcel of the human condition. If we were thinking like nature, we’d be worried not for our sakes; we’re already here, and able to reproduce - but about whether things would be tenable for our descendants five, six, or a dozen generations down the line. Which, statistically, they will. “That which doesn’t kill us makes us stronger” might not be true at the individual level, but it’s true for our species. Almost 100 billion people needed to come, suffer, and go before the advent of antibacterial soap, of penicillin, of airbags; only a tiny percent of women who have ever lived have attempted childbirth with more than a coin flip’s chance of living.

First and foremost, we’ve got to stop the bleeding. This means selectively dumbing ourselves down a little. Spending most of our day reading through the world’s various issues because we feel like we must have the most virtuous opinion on every possible cultural and geopolitical issue is less helpful than we think. With so much information flying around, and with being ostensibly progressive all but requiring a constant state of cynicism, extricating ourselves will be a challenge. “Maximally-informed” and “wise” might not be as synonymous as they appear. Don’t shoot the messenger, but the same might be true for “consuming content” and “meaningful activism.”

Ideally, we combine this with a healthier relationship to the issues facing us at the societal and civilizational levels. This may sound paradoxical, but it isn’t: our rapacious appetite for gore and shock - which is happily fed by our media - leads us to believe that the world’s problems and its people are as bad, or even worse, than they’ve ever been. I’m not saying our anger or despair is irrational, but that, as individuals, these are impossible burdens to carry if we’re to have any hope of preserving our health and sanity. Our opulent highs juxtaposed against their lows make for distressing images, to be sure; great fodder for shame-and fear-mongering.

Likewise, the use of arbitrary (and flawed) metrics - GINI, GDP, etc. It's not en vogue, but we should try to adopt a more measured perspective in this regard. Comparison won't only be the thief of *their* joy: we're so desperate to be the most conscientious that it hampers our own search for happiness.

Our challenge, then, as it relates to how we see the outside world, is mainly one of acceptance; that we are lucky, and that we exist - whether we like it or not - in a world infinitely more comfortable and more hospitable to human life than it's ever been, but also in one that has not yet achieved equilibrium. And one where conditions, examined on a large enough time scale, will improve. All any of us can do is that which might feel insufficient, while relinquishing our (commendable, but futile) grip on the idea that we, alone, are culpable for the world's past and responsible for its fate.

So that's it? Our only responsibility with regard to Africa and the other places we volunteer (and film ourselves exploring) is to just rejig our perspective of time? *Is this enough? you ask, earnestly.* Even if we succeed in suppressing our desire to look busy and in tackling our ignorance, we're left in a state of ... what? Willful ignorance? In practice, what makes it any different to enlightened centrism? To normal, selfish apathy?

There's more to it than that. Nobly resolving to sit on our hands make us feel slightly better, but this, too, would be kicking the can down the road. It allows the systemic issues - to which we in the West also fall victim - to go unaddressed.

25

LOOK AROUND OR: THE PANOPTICON

The West has, to its credit, correctly identified the importance of ontological security. To progress, a country must be provided with reliable infrastructure upon which it can build routine: the water will turn on in the morning when I want to brush my teeth, and it will also be safe to drink; the bus will arrive to take me to my workplace (which adheres to labor laws and provides me with a living wage); when it's time to clock out and go home, there will still *be* a home waiting for me, and so forth. If we live in fear that the foundational aspects of civilization might be pulled from under us, we are doomed to operate in a constant state of distrust and unease which, not incidentally, preclude us from being able to think further ahead than the present moment.

In being so preoccupied with other countries' concerns, however, we fail to register the precarity of our own circumstances. Millions of our own citizens live without ontological security. We disregard this fact - if we register it at all. The usual suspects are to blame: our corporate-owned news and media industries do a terrific job of prioritizing audience capture over substantive, meaningful content. Our shrunken attention spans means that, when - or even *if* - an issue is acknowledged, it doesn't

stay on our minds for long. Just long enough, at most, to make us feel a momentary swell of pity - enough to reassure us that our conscience is still in working order. Phew! Thankfully, these swells ebb away completely by the middle of the next commercial break.

I recognize that it's unfair of me to have ambushed us like this. As a show of good faith, I humbly offer my services as our defense lawyer, which I will undertake pro bono. I may not be able to get us off the hook completely, but I'm pretty sure I can swing a plea deal. *Don't blame me - you get what you pay for.*

Out of the gate, I'd try a smokescreen, pointing to the sheer size of our country as an excuse. Most of us can't list the 50 states off the top of our head, for Christ's sake. How are we supposed to care about states we couldn't find on a map? We've never been to, say, Montana or Arkansas, nor do we know anyone who lives there. Between the unfathomable scale (how the hell did Lewis and Clark do it?) and a federal government which has proudly given sovereignty to each state, a unified national identity is non-existent. Patriotism, a love of the flag both symbolically and literally, has been co-opted by right wing parties in both America and England. Their pride is for their provincial idea of America: the second amendment, the Cowboys, the stand-your-ground law, and so on. Their rabid protectiveness does not extend to feeling aggrieved for an impoverished child whose town in Michigan is failing to provide its citizens with drinking water. There will be no mobilizing of our local militia to rush to their defense. Likewise, some WASP from New England who uses summer as a verb feels no obligation to help a struggling person or town in backwoods Mississippi.

Hang on, you say, that doesn't hold any water: it's still far easier and cheaper to reach anywhere in the continental US than Africa. And, even if there is a grain of truth, what's England's excuse? They're tiny.

Well played; and you're right: the mere fact that there are *any*

people in America and England who are as poor as someone we'd feel bad for if they were black and living somewhere in Africa exposes every single one of us voluntourists as frauds. There is no justifiable reason for us to donate our time and money abroad than to satisfy our own ulterior motives. Checkmate.

...or so it seems.

This damning and utterly irrefutable indictment has a simple (not to say a *rational*) explanation.

Here, I'd wheel out the show-stopper: that is, our version of an insanity defense. For us - who are not of sound mind - there is no contradiction, no nagging cognitive dissonance; what looks like blatant hypocrisy isn't actually so: *their* (that is, anyone suffering outside our borders) issues and *our* issues are not only unrelated but flat out incomparable. In our eyes, poor people and suffering are not all created equal. *Their* problems, you see, are systemic. Ours - thank god - are individual, meaning they can - and *ought* - to be solved by the individual.

Besides; a *true* American, be they red or blue, poor or rich, black, white, yellow, red - oops - or, uh... purple, shouldn't even *want* charity, irrespective of whether or not they need it. And they *certainly* wouldn't want it to come from the big bad government. This only applies to the individual, of course; not our banks and their executives. In their field, big government is actually good. Don't try and understand all this - just let it wash over you. Americans, lest we forget, are the ones who've been sent here by god to pity others. It's manifest destiny. We deal in pride, 'round these parts; the only relationship we have with pity is as an export. We don't indulge empathy for ourselves or others. As we like to say: *if you get knocked down seven times, you get up eight*. But this doesn't even make sense; really, you should only have to get up seven times, as you'd have to have been standing in the first place to have been eligible for getting knocked down. I digress.

On second thought, this seemingly innocuous miscalculation reveals something about us. Since we're lauded for the sheer number of times we get up, we end up being incentivized to

knock ourselves over - or just to claim that we have been. The benefit of this is that it allows us to pay little mind when we see other Americans in dire straits; from our point of view, they should be grateful for having an opportunity to build character. We see our indifference not as inhumanity but in fact as a favor - let him cry himself to sleep, it'll toughen him up - he'll thank us later. Unfortunately, we so fetishize recovering from adversity that we barely stop to consider whether there might be a benefit to tackling its root causes; this would necessitate restructuring the very fabric of our society.

What these attitudes give you at scale is a culture meticulously constructed to not just leverage the banality of evil, but to smugly enshrine it as a core precept - a culture in which it is all but sanctified. Indeed; though ostensibly well-meaning, the true sentiment behind our brand of tough love - "I didn't get a helping hand, and look how things turned out for me - pretty good, I'd say!" is far more sadistic: "I [believe that I] had to struggle, so I believe you should, too." This, of course, is a false equivalency: all struggle is conveniently oversimplified to "overcoming whatever one's personal circumstances happen to be."

These bad faith arguments - including those in which *equality* of opportunity is conflated with *equity* - are, not incidentally, espoused most vociferously by those who rode the wave of the post-War economic boom and who benefitted from the systematic oppression of millions of people. In their defense, the media and information they were exposed to in their formative years was a trickle, relative to what we're faced with, and its content was essentially limited to American Dream and Red Scare propaganda; calls for unity and patriotism against the threat of communism. It was very much the West against the world; moreover, people had no reason to be suspicious of a government that had just led them to back-to-back world war victories and out of a depression (which they didn't have to endure, contrary to what they'd have you believe) into an unprecedented boom. In these golden years, a summer job covered most of your college tuition.

Not that you needed a degree, by the way; a factory job could easily sustain a family and allow for home ownership.

In any case, what we're left with is a country owned and operated by people who were born on third base and think they hit a triple. You can tell how cushy their gig is because they'd rather die - literally - than relinquish power: most of our top politicians are older than the legal retirement age in Europe. We have dozens of senators and congresspeople over the age of 75 - and a few over 90. The majority of these politicians are millionaires; and it's they who (to switch metaphors) now pull the ladder up behind them, kneecapping subsequent generations' ability to enter the property market, pursue higher education, and consider children as anything more than an unjustifiable expense. When criticizing other countries, we smugly profess that the government you elect is the government you deserve. This doesn't flatter us as much as we think it does.

Our history - and therefore our present - is very much written by the victors in this regard. The objective truth isn't the point, it's about consolidating the public relations victory. Hearts and minds. We get a brief mention that other options may have existed, but these are never examined in good faith. Communism, for example, apparently accounted for over 100 million deaths - how lucky we are, then, that capitalism isn't to blame for any. Their famines and healthcare crises are because of corruption, the evils of communism, and so on. Ours are just chalked up to plain old bad luck or, at worst, the fault of a few bad apples.

It's because of this phenomenon, by the way, that I suspect racial tension (including the specter of apartheid) will be allowed to hang around, as will other identity conflicts. The exact form these distractions take - and whether they're used as meat-shields for cynical politicians to hide behind, or as cat-o-ninetails with which we can lash ourselves - is largely irrelevant.

If we decide that the millions upon millions of the suffering, the diseased, and the dead are no longer victims of apartheid's posthumous convulsions, but instead of victims of their own

leaders, this opens the door for the far more odious corollary. If we reach a consensus that the poor are no longer dying because of Apartheid, we'll be tempted to shift the entirety of the blame onto the bad apples. Resisting this will be difficult, because we sure do love a show trial, and putting a face to a name (the names, in this case, being Evil, Corruption, Greed, and so on). It's easy to identify poverty as an effect, a symptom, which makes the inordinately rich the disease - but what if *both* groups are symptomatic of a yet bigger issue? What if Zuma and the Guptas are products, too? And not flawed ones, either; ones working exactly as intended. As soon as we admit the poor aren't dying because of apartheid, we'll need to confront the possibility that they're dying because of capitalism; Zuma and his cronies are just its apparatus.

This is unsavory. It's far preferable, for now, if we're incited individualized displays of performative guilt than to focus our attention on the bigger picture, a system that incentivizes - and indeed *requires* - the dehumanization and exploitation of so many billions of people.



A global system based on schoolyard principles like Might Makes Right and Finder's Keepers is good fun if you arrive early enough to get in on the looting; its supposed fuel: work ethic, private property and individualism, it turns out, were much more effective when there were enslaved people and indentured servants working away in the background to keep things chugging along. What is also intentionally avoided is the fact that such a system will necessarily tend towards concentration of wealth rather than dispersion meaning that, as time passes, wealth inequality can only increase. And it has: baby boomers are a staggering 90-plus percent more wealthy than those half their age; who have, on average, only about two thousand dollars in savings. The game of monopoly doesn't end with everyone winning; it ends when one person has made it impossible for the other players to move

without adding to his coffers - have we not reached that point? It's a frustrating enough game as it is - now imagine you show up to the party late and someone's already built hotels on every property. Nevertheless, you're strapped in and forced to play,

You'd think that these two groups would be divided cleanly: the delusional third basers-cum-ladder-puller-uppers against everyone else. Incredibly, this is not the case. Traditional demographics like gender, political party guarantee nothing; protectors of the system come in all shapes and sizes. Nancy Pelosi, a woman and a democrat, served as the speaker of the house until she was 83, and is worth almost \$200 million dollars. Her husband is one of the most successful stock traders ever, which I'm sure is a coincidence.

But even personal wealth is no indicator. Nor, more interestingly, is lack of it: necessarily, but no less ironically, most sympathists aren't even on the ladder. Imagine, for a moment, if you suggested resetting that aforementioned Monopoly board - or switching to a different, more inclusive game entirely. It's not the winner who shoots down your idea and calls you a sore loser - he's not even at the table. Instead, it's the guy who the winner pays minimum wage to manage the properties and collect your paycheck every month.

It's this, at scale, that we're up against: hundreds of millions of self-loathing apologists for abject cruelty. We are absolved of guilt and responsibility to each other, and inoculated from cognitive dissonance by pseudo-scientific reassurances like self-interest is the only thing all humans have in common, that the only obligation we have as humans is to exploit our comparative advantage to its fullest extent, and so on. Greed, they proudly declare, is the only universal language, it's the only language worth speaking; fluency is something to celebrate and strive for.

As the only moral compass we're told to worry about is the cost benefit analysis, anything that doesn't produce unitary value is an unjustifiable waste of resources. Outlay of time and capital is only permissible if positive return on investment is guaranteed.

As a consequence, every relationship becomes transactional, every interaction a zero-sum negotiation. We have no choice but to regard our neighbors and colleagues with squinting distrust: *He's suspiciously cheery this morning... he must want something*. Our esteem for things like human connection, civic pride and community engagement has been crippled. Concepts like social welfare are scoffed at, regarded as suspiciously "European" (read: fanciful, lazy), if not downright communistic. Anything other than deference to the invisible hand (like comparing salaries to make sure someone isn't getting stiffed) is tantamount to full-blown anarchism - and don't even *think* about organizing a union. The vital ingredient here is (avowed) distrust of big government: the only thing you can truly rely on to meet your basic human needs is the market itself. As established, of course, this diktat only applies to the working class. If you're rich, the government is there to be molded, and to make your life easy. More on that shortly.



The peoples we exterminated to claim our land were at the mercy of elements they didn't fully understand; as such, they had no choice but to deify them, pledging their unconditional loyalty and support in the hopes that this would be rewarded with a bountiful harvest, a healthy newborn, or what have you. These peoples tried everything; from rain dances all the way to sacrificing their animals and virgins on the off chance these displays would buy them forbearance.

Ironically, our crude understanding of, yet complete dependence on, the systems around us leads us to act just as desperately as in our attempts to gain favor. However fickle and uninterested in our well-being these nebulous forces may be, we have no choice but to bend to their every whim. The power dynamic in which we're involved, in fact, may be even more asymmetric and parasocial: the weather's patterns, after all, were cyclical and, for the

most part, balanced; they were driven by no self-given mandate for perpetual growth.

By explicitly mapping out the route to prosperity and happiness, the system ensures that it will remain exalted: how can it be at fault if it has given me everything I need to succeed? It's up to me and me alone, as the architect of my own life, to live up to my potential. The pandemic of loneliness, depression, and anxiety is, we're assured by those above and around us, coincidental. It is not symptomatic of any systemic failings; any struggles we have are rooted in our own shortcomings: Have you tried getting more exercise? What about keeping a gratitude journal?

The conclusion to which we're led is that, since luck has nothing to do with it, anyone who has money must be proportionally more industrious and wiser, and flat out more deserving than us. Contrary to what you may have heard, the means of production are not being hoarded; if you'd just pull your head out, you'd see that they've been democratized and are completely open source: Do each of us not possess self-interest, after all? And are we not each given the same number of hours per day? That's right. Back to work. Since wealth is the only thing we respect, having wealth is conflated with the ability to amass it; both are regarded as indicators of virtue. The wealthy, therefore, don't just avoid scrutiny, they are lionized, and amass legions of sycophantic admirers.

Unsurprisingly, our unconditional loyalty is used against us; we're forced to argue against our own interests: this is how you get someone living just above the poverty line explaining to his equally poor co-worker why the politicians are right not to raise the minimum wage or provide healthcare, public transport, or safe drinking water. Or why they're right to cut a food-stamp program that might help different poor people a few counties over. Not only are welfare programs not "realistic," they encourage laziness and would require "big government," which, remember, is out to keep us down. We believe that, because we do not have luxuries like efficient infrastructure, healthcare, and

education, we must not deserve them. This conceit is baked into our language: we have been made to believe that a living - happiness, health, shelter, and so on - must be *earned*. This is the accompanying verb we've chosen, and it's no accident. A living, an existence, must be justified, must be toiled for.

Indeed: having a fundamental divide between those who pretend that our system is a meritocracy versus those who don't means we lack a societal consensus on basic human rights - the effects of this are catastrophic. Millions of us believe that a right to bear arms is a more inalienable one than access to healthcare, shelter, or even just food.

Meanwhile, we laud the rich for deftly avoiding taxes which might have gone towards public infrastructure and our childrens' schools. "The rich are smarter and more qualified - or at least able to hire accountants who are - and thus deserve to benefit from these loopholes. Credit to 'em, as far as I'm concerned." Attempts to justify our deference on more rational grounds point out that, actually, they *should* be exempt from the rules that we are: if we keep them sweet they'll hire more of us and won't outsource production. A tragic example of this was before the 2016 election, when millions of Trump voters were forced to defend the position that, actually, it was a good thing that Trump refused to reveal his tax returns. The wealthy who don't work but benefit from government loopholes and handouts are called savvy; the poor who do this are lazy and degenerate.

But what do we get in return for so slavishly debasing ourselves? *Surely*, you're thinking, *the juice is worth the squeeze*. But no, it turns out; we don't get much at all. In fact, all it takes to keep us inside is to drip feed us with hope and positive affirmation that our greed and willingness to sacrifice our every waking moment - traits we've been encouraged to cultivate - are vital prerequisites for eventual success. This explains how you get millions of poor and working class, desperate for every proof-of-concept underdog story they can get, pour forth in their multitudes to testify to the humble origins of people like Elon Musk

and Bill Gates. “They started working in a garage, and look where they are now. What’s our excuse? We just have to buckle down.”

My excuse, if you’re wondering, is that my dad didn’t own an emerald mine: curiously, what we hear far less often than the rags-to-riches bit is the parents being well-connected and wealthy executives, lawyers, and politicians bit. Indeed, the best indicator of whether you’ll end up rich is not, contrary to the claims of these boot-lickers and bootstrappers’ claims, how hard you work or how miserly you are, but whether or not your parents were wealthy. I can say, with certainty, that not one of my social studies, economics, or history teachers ever mentioned this - an accidental oversight, I’m sure. What many of us don’t quite seem to understand is that self-interest verging on sociopathy is merely a *necessary* condition for success - not a sufficient one. The only thing cultivating a “CEO Mindset” *will* guarantee is that you’re an asshole.

We smugly label other countries as plutocracies, oligarchies, and corporatocracies: look at all that morally reprehensible “undue influence” over there in South Africa. It’s a good thing *we* don’t have any of that. (Of course, if South Africa wanted to get us off their back they could just rename their businessmen as “lobbyists.”) While we’re on the topic, if we *don’t* encourage bribery and have an equal playing field, then why is our maximum campaign donation limit tethered to inflation when our minimum wage isn’t?

We scold them for corruption, crony capitalism, and dirty capitalism, racketeering, rent-seeking, and so on, while pontificating about our virtuous neoliberal values. How long will we allow ourselves to get bogged down into this attritional war over semantics? There’s a lowest common denominator here that, apparently, is beyond reproach. When do we start to wonder if these euphemisms and buzzwords aren’t, for our purposes, synonymous? We are filibustering ourselves into oblivion.

Capitalism can be credited with significant advancements in science, medicine, and technology. But so can enslavement and

other forms of subjugation and immiseration of people and workers - do the contributions of these systems mean they can never be upgraded or retired altogether? Every now-defunct system of government and economics once felt inevitable, unimprovable, and inescapable, so that's good news, I guess. But never before have the mechanisms of control been so faceless, decentralized, and efficient.

Indeed; you'd think all of this technological advancement, increase in productivity, and surplus value would mean we'd be allowed to work fewer hours; smarter, not harder. Wrong. It's still quantity over quality, as far as man-hours are concerned. It may be widely known that the average cubicle worker only does a couple of hours of actual work a day; and that employee happiness, physical and mental health, productivity and company loyalty all stand to go up if the switch is made to a shorter workday and a four day work week. It's almost as if they'd rather justify the cost of commercial real estate (a multi-billion dollar market of its own). This leaves us stuck in a doom loop of renting, spending, hustling, a perpetual state of sleep-deprivation and burnout. Not even Penrose steps; just a Penrose escalator. Meanwhile, our actual odds of making it to the promised land get slimmer and slimmer.

Our hopelessness is turned inwards, and in turn projected onto those around us. We attack ourselves and each other, like lab rats deprived of food, sleep, and space. In our vulnerable state, our limbic systems have been hijacked, too. As consolation for all this disempowerment, we enjoy the limited selection of what comforts we can afford. Some of these are more abstract: point-scoring on each other, and so on. But material comforts are what we really look forward to. To fund our pathological need for retail therapy, we cling on to any financial security we can get - whatever the psychological or intellectual cost. Not incidentally, these purchases include devices we tether ourselves to and that sit in our homes - and, increasingly, in garages and driveways - hanging onto our every word so that they can attune to our every possible need.

Our stress-induced tunnel vision means we have no choice

but to ignore the inconvenient fact that the earth could not support the world's population living as even we, the comfortable do - *let alone* as the richest of us do. We couldn't give every last poor person the lifestyle we enjoy - even if we wanted to. In letting ourselves get bogged down in fighting over cosmetic and ultimately trivial issues at the fringes of this system, we allow its core presuppositions - the far more pernicious ones - to be taken for granted: namely, that growth and production must - and *ought* to, morally-speaking - continue in perpetuity. We see these as not as unsubstantiated theories they are but as immutable laws of nature. Though it may not feel like it, we must remember that the system we have now isn't the natural state of things. But it's worse than that. It is, by definition, completely incapable of coexistence with our finite natural world. There is no such thing as "green" or "sustainable" infinite growth. These ostensibly progressive corporate catchphrases are oxymoronic. Unceasing expansion requires unceasing production, which requires unceasing extraction of labor and resources - and therefore never-ending destruction and waste creation.

Every shred of time and inclination we might have otherwise used to think critically is being sapped from us. Answers for these bigger questions are not provided, nor do we bother to ask for them. Something's only a problem once it hits us in the face. For everything else, we send thoughts and prayers.



So, if it isn't clear: not even those of us *with* ontological security are exempt. We, the comfortable are the frogs being gradually boiled while being made to believe that we've been lucky enough to stumble upon a jacuzzi: *If only those poor sods out in the cold knew how good we had it.* As things stand, we don't have true liberty - *hauntological* liberty, as it were - any more than the people we're taught to pity (or detest, depending on where they live). The America-brand freedom we enjoy (and whose values we

smugly extol) is only a curated experience, and one that isn't provided in good faith.

We, as loyal end-consumers, sign away our money, attention, and time; agreeing to the terms of service because there's no viable alternative. We're often warned that if a product is free, *it's* not the product - *you're* the product. This warning is now obsolete. Before, we paid *or* sacrificed our privacy. Now we happily do both. Our devices know exactly how we look, sound, and think. They know our sleep patterns, health history, habits and insecurities. We, like those primitive hunter-gatherers and medieval serfs, are also forced to behave as if we are under constant surveillance from a higher power. In our case, ironically, this suspicion is now a rational one: as the boundaries between work and leisure blur, as the number of interconnected devices around us proliferates, a panopticon has been created. We tacitly accept that our lifestyles and privately held beliefs are subject to examination by prospective employers. You never know when the almighty are tuning in, so it's better to behave; he might just reward you for your blind obedience. We even shame those who are skeptical. "I didn't know you were one of those tinfoil hat conspiracy theorists. What's next, you're gonna tell me Lee Harvey Oswald was a CIA asset? Get outta here." Then, when the news leaks that Google or Facebook *do* use our devices to harvest data around the clock, the goalposts change. "Actually, I'd *rather* get ads for products I talk to my friends about than for random junk that I'd never buy - wouldn't you? Anyway, why are you so worried about them watching us once in a while? You got something to hide?"

Give us liberty or give us death, our nascent union's rallying cry, was a profound ultimatum -but our bluff is getting called. We may think that the last great land grab was for Africa; fat, jowly Belgians, French, and English sitting around an unfurled map in some smoke-filled board room. But a similar process is happening now, with us as the subject. We're like whales to a group of Eskimo - every last scrap of our bodies, minds, and time is fair game and spoken for. Actually, I fear even this grisly metaphor is

inadequate; those ancient peoples had some reverence and gratitude for their prey, at least; an appreciation for natural balance and moderation. In our case, however, our attention, our property, and even our personal space have been divvied up and are now administered by people who abhor us. We are livestock whose sole purpose is to provide as much value as possible to whomever gets there first. The contempt with which we're regarded is reflected in our architecture, art, and media: give 'em cheap, disposable, and easily replaceable - they won't mind. And we *don't* seem to mind: over 90% of the content we consume on social media was made within the last 24 hours. We happily strap on our kneepads and gulp down every last drop of gravy.

Given the market's categorical imperative to only output that which can guarantee profit, enjoying the ease of the modern world and consuming its media means being haunted by - and trapped in - a past which cannot be banished or outrun. So we're doomed, too. Doomed, for perpetuity, to be patronized by brow-lowering homogeneity. *Cyclical* homogeneity, perhaps, but homogeneity all the same. Better the devil you know, as far as we're concerned: margins, no matter how razor-thin, must continue to be extracted; diminishing utility is still utility. It's a race to the bottom: every single aspect of our lives is commodified and optimized for profit. We're cursed to relive the past ad infinitum as it's reupholstered, rebooted, and regurgitated in various high-definition and high-fidelity guises and wheeled out for us to lap up.

And it's a two-pronged attack. Being forced to engage with wave after increasingly diluted and derivative wave not only precludes us from escaping and thus being able to reflect upon our past, it compromises our future. We, like the foreigners we're taught to pity, are kept distracted by spurious narratives of opportunity, forced to hold out hope for promises which will never be realized. Having delivered us to a point where our problems are now trivial (or altogether imaginary), history is thus subsumed into a commercialized, never-ending, and intellectually-stunted reality in which everything changes, but nothing actually

happens. We so love novelty and the illusion of choice that we accept cosmetic upgrades in lieu of meaningful change.

Our gig (not any given occupation, that is, but our status quo) is slightly too cozy to leave, but nowhere near fulfilling or engaging enough to wholeheartedly devote oneself to. Clock in every morning, answer a few emails, try to look busy until the clock strikes five; keep your head down for a few decades, don't rock the boat; you'd be surprised how far you'll get. How does a cushy executive role sound? Not quite *golden* handcuffs, then, but at least silver ones. Just good enough, by a preponderance (which I assure you has been calculated), to make the prospect of obedience a more appealing one than going off-piste (and thus risking social ostracization and financial instability). And, of equal importance, this serves to make us question whether the system, which has been *so* generous to us, might not be worth siding with, after all. Is it really worth making a stink? Decidedly, no.

But it's not all relaxation; we have a vital role to play. Ironically - or perhaps fittingly - it's us, the hustlers, grinders, extra-source-of-passive-income-hunters, who take on volunteer shifts around the clock as firefighters, food-tasters, propagandists, union busters and meter maids to protect and maintain a system that despises us. It's not just our devices that make up the panopticon, it's us, too. We're the immune system, suppressing revolt at the social level long before it's allowed to gain momentum and trouble those in power. With our help, the system is thus able to uphold its avowed support of ideas like free speech by decentralizing control, delegating the job of censorship and enforcement to us.

The social mechanisms we use to preserve the status quo may appear innocuous, but they've been perfected over centuries. We make sure uncomfortable issues and questions are minimized or silenced altogether, either by character assassination, ridicule, or otherwise. The first question we ask of each other is what we do for a living; the form our labor takes dictates how we are viewed by others, and vice versa. We're jealous of (if obedient to) those

with more status than us, and openly scornful towards those with less. We dictate what dignified, proper, and well-trained people are allowed to talk about. Excluded from this list, funnily enough, is money: which, it's been decided, it's uncouth to discuss. We don't even have to be instructed not to tell other people how much money we make. We keep this to ourselves, reasoning that other people might get jealous if they find out we make more.

Luckily, if you're frustrated by any of this, you can make your voice heard - this is a free country, after all. Not *literally* heard, of course; you may technically have free speech, but this gets a little complicated. Since nothing - no art, discourse, innovation - can exist outside of this seemingly omnipotent system, expressing dissent is seen as extremely ideological, radical, sacrilegious. Defense, meanwhile, is not rooted in any ideology. Other than common sense, of course. Just because you don't like the weather, doesn't mean you direct your anger to the heavens. If someone tried to fight the rain, we'd call them insane or simple-minded. We don't waste a second imagining a world without the sun or the sky - what would be the point? This is the natural state of things. Consequently, this leaves us vulnerable to accusations of:

- Treachery, general ingratitude: "This is how you repay the system that's given you so much?" or "You think your problems are bad? Do you know how many people would kill to be in your shoes?"
- "Sour grapes," general laziness: "You're just jealous of those with more. You wouldn't be complaining if you were rich."
- Hypocrisy: "How interesting: you critique the system, yet you participate in it. Look - you have an iPhone and drink Starbucks. How do you expect to be taken seriously?"
- Fear-mongering: "Why do you have to be so pessimistic? You're ruining the mood. You might not have hope, but we do."

- Naiveté: "Providing people with the means to be healthy and educated just isn't realistic. Sorry, pal, that's just not how the world works. If you can't beat 'em join 'em." or "Yes, we may produce enough food to feed 150% of the world's population, and have a system wherein companies are incentivized to destroy unsold food instead of giving it to the hungry. But you can't get food to everyone - this isn't make believe land. It's logistically impossible. Anyway, have you heard about Elon Musk's plan to colonize Mars? Sounds pretty cool."

And other general ad-hominem: "Why don't you give away all your money, if you love the idea of sharing so much? That's right. You're just as greedy as the rest of us." or "Why do you keep whining that we should have more than 10 days off a year? Or more than a week of paternity leave? You sound spoiled and lazy. Get back to work."

Apparently, our only chance of this destruction slowing down hinges on the off chance that the fossil fuel industries find an alternative that's so profitable that their current methods are rendered obsolete. For some reason, be it ignorance, denial, or some sort of Stockholm Syndrome, we can't wrap our heads around the fact that every single thing we do has been analyzed root and branch, split tested, actuarialized and commodified. We know that even their charitable efforts are exclusively for tax benefits or positive PR, but we don't care. We still take the bait each and every goddamn time, thanking them for every meaningless, focus-group-approved drop of gruel they allow to drip into our gaping, desperate mouths. We just can't seem to help ourselves: we credit Disney for wheeling out a non-white mermaid or princess; we laugh when our favorite fast food chain for tweeting a sassy comeback at one of its rivals; we applaud our retail or car company changing its logo to a rainbow or black and white theme (for Pride and black history months, respectively).

Indeed; we've not just given corporations the same legal protections we have, we've let them assimilate socially; as we attempt to become brands, we let brands pretend to be human. We defend them and their executives as we would a close friend - or even more ardently, in some cases.

It's this phenomenon that allows us to further depersonalize each other, ensuring that the substance of any deeper societal complaints need never be addressed.

Alrighty, so that's free speech at the individual level ruled out. Now what? Well, there's your right to assemble, but you should refrain from this if possible. See above: too uncivilized; you'll make everyone uncomfortable. This applies to unionizing, protesting, or revolting. Unless, of course, it's to join a hip social movement.

So that's out, too. What's left?

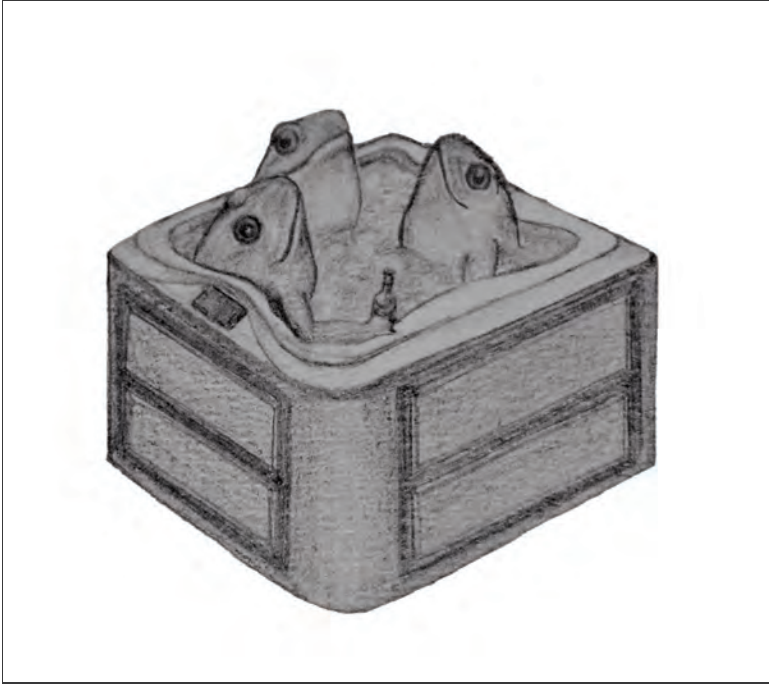
From the darkness, an olive branch appears...

The best chance of making your voice heard is, we're told, to vote. This doesn't refer to your electoral vote, mind you, although we like to make a big song and dance of this, too, pretending that either of the two geriatrics on offer will have any meaningful impact on our lives.

Our *real* recourse, *democracy*-wise, our real secret weapon, is the one afforded to us by our dollar. How lucky we are that our deadliest tool also happens to be state-sanctioned and widely available: with this in hand, you can vote tens, hundreds, thousands of times a day. Then, if you run out, you can apply for a credit card which gives you even more.

This, my friends, fellow consumers, countrymen... *this* is Freedom. The beauty of the free market is that it provides us with what we want, what we *need*, more than anything else: unlimited choice every second of the day. If we've got beef with someone, we're given a veritable license to kill, by way of hitting our enemy where it hurts: their wallet. It's no coincidence that even activism and solidarity have been commodified; turned into markets to be exploited. There's never a moment of boredom. If you don't like

the latest superhero movie, not to worry: the franchise is releasing a spin-off, prequel, or sequel in a week's time. We can exercise our freedom all over the place. Everything from which of the grocery store's 47 types of peanut butter we prefer all the way down to which impoverished country we want to visit. Talk about spoiled for choice!



"This is the life!"

26

EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON

OR: T.I.APOCRYPHA

Now, it's not much fun to think that we've been drafted, unconsenting, into a brute force eugenics experiment that's going to kill us all and is happening for no discernible reason. Nor that the few good years we *do* have are spoiled by a system designed to keep us poor, exhausted, uninformed, distracting us with a never-ending stream of algorithmically formulated content while barraging us with constant reminders of how thankful we should be. And, even though conditions will improve over time, we won't be around to enjoy them. Just our luck: born too late to enjoy the good old days, but too early to enjoy the future. How do we not get too bogged down in the implications of all this so that we can hope to function, let alone enjoy what little time we do have?

I hear you. There must be something we can cling to in the short term for purpose, meaning, and optimism. I'll tell you what would come in handy: a draught excluder or two for our existential dread, angst, and survivor's guilt. A father figure, perhaps, or a shepherd, who might alleviate some of this unbearable pain; who could help us answer the unanswerable, to take the wheel and ferry us across these troubled waters to safer ground. Don't look

at me like that - why should *they* have a monopoly on consolation? On reassurance?

I fear that, in our haste to jettison antiquated ways of thinking in favor of science, logic, and efficiency, we've left behind some useful insights into our nature.

It's left us with all the bad parts of a theocracy: dogmatism, demagoguery, and fear - but none of the good: community, hope, meaning. *Our* spiritual band-aids, by comparison, are decidedly uninspiring: "*There, there - don't cry over spilt milk,*" "*It is what it is,*" "*Time heals all wounds.*" - are you kidding? We want something actionable. If we were up to it, we'd make a grab for some of their crown jewels: imagine, just for a moment, if *we* could get the serenity to accept what we can't change, the courage to change what we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Oh, baby. Then we'd *really* be cookin' with gas.



The good news is we've more or less already covered the first part of that by resolving to tackle our savior complexes and recalibrate how we see the world at large, etc. But we don't have much purchase on the latter thirds: what *can* we do, in the meantime, while we're waiting with baited breath for the fossil fuel industry to save us? We might need to sidle back up to the theological buffet table.

At first glance, it doesn't seem like there's much we can use. Other mantras they like to wheel out include "it's all part of His plan" and its variants. For one, these aren't exactly watertight: if He, the all-loving, decides what's going to happen in advance, why would he let anyone do something that would get them sent to hell? Or, for that matter, create a hell where people could be sent at all?

But that's the least of it: these reassurances seem to imply that we must relinquish the notion that we enjoy unfettered free will. I

know what you're thinking - or at least what I'd be thinking:
With all due respect, get lost.

I'm pretty confident I speak for almost all of us, on this matter. We may not be happy with our lives - indeed, many of us are deeply unsatisfied - but we wouldn't trade being the main character in our stories for anything. Mythomania, it turns out, is a hell of a drug. We'd rather wedge a toothpick under our big toenail and kick a wall than abdicate our place at the wheel, narrative-wise, thank you very much. We're fiends, all of us, and we indulge our addiction constantly; constructing elaborate pretenses to conceal our immaturity, our insecurities, and our shameful ulterior motives. The dull, predictable truth is, it turns out, rarely divulged freely. We're especially deceptive - both to ourselves and others - once given the benefit of hindsight, at which point we can sift back through the facts and retrofit almost any scaffolding we want. Fruitless or unflattering plot points fade away, while any suitable ones and the connections between them become clear. Vaguely relevant childhood memory? Let's see if we can't fudge some of the details and shoehorn it in. Inconvenient piece of evidence? No bother - chuck it. Right, let's see here: A led to B, during which I met C and realized D. Over time, as these stories acquire a momentum of their own, a certain inevitability, we gloss over or forget just how unstable their foundations are. In my case, three stints and two years in South Africa sounds solid enough. But if that first flight to Cape Town had required a prohibitive 18 hour layover in Singapore, or the only volunteering role available had been to help to rebuild a community center somewhere in the slums of Lima, my passion for saving children might well have been shelved indefinitely. That stays between us, I hope.

And, by the way: if I *had* gone to Peru, you'd better believe I'd be telling you about my aunt who climbed Machu Picchu and about my first Tintin book, *Prisoners of the Sun*, where he and Captain Haddock get captured by a lost tribe of Incans while exploring deep in the Andes. I'd read this one until the pages liter-

ally fell out. These abortive catalysts ought to have carried just as much weight as what Zimmer did. But I haven't been to Peru - not yet, at least - so Tintin and all the other potential contributors for that story remain latent, left to gather dust until they're called into action.

As I looked inside the cafe at the father and son, I wondered whether they, like me, had their own sentimental connection to this town; if they felt as indebted to it as I did. But maybe they didn't; perhaps this café in Surfer's Corner had been nothing but a convenient meeting point for two estranged parents to exchange custody of their child. Just for the sake of it, though, let's say the dad, hoping to please his son, *had* only picked the café based on a web search for the best ice cream in Muizenberg. Whether or not his decision's rationale was trivial, its consequences - years'-worth of shared memories and experiences - were anything but. Would it really be so narcissistic if he credited himself commensurate with the outcome? I hoped (and hope) not.

There must be a way to channel our love of narrative - and our immense talent for overlaying it and weaving it into our lives - in a way that serves something more than our own egomania, helping us learn, grow, and better connect with others. Besides; I fear our revisionism is an inevitability, given the hand we're dealt: the burden's on us to learn, entertain and connect with others as we interface with the outside world, with the unhelpful caveat being, of course, that our development is nowhere near as linear or predictable as the passage of time. (The ever-concise Amish sum us up well: "too soon old, too late smart.") Wisdom and happiness are too hard-won; we aren't going to stop romanticizing our paths to find them any time soon. And as the borders of our lives continue to be infringed upon and we career head-long toward climate catastrophe and mass-extinction, the time and resources to achieve population-wide jettisoning of ego are luxuries we might not have; we'll have to make do with the tools we've got. The question, I think, is whether we can accept a two-state solution: not pitting ourselves *against* fate and the outside

world, but allowing for peaceful coexistence and even cooperation.

In this light, "Everything happens for a reason" is starting to look mighty fetching (any port in a storm, indeed...); maybe it's worth a second look. After all; for those who believe it to be true, it sure seems like everybody - both they and their creator, that is - comes out ahead:

Good things, it turns out, are to be celebrated - and credited to Him: they are a final reward, the culmination of a long chain of events. *Praise be*. Bad things, by contrast, are never the end of the story; they're hurdles intentionally placed in our path to strengthen us. Think about it: every athlete on the victorious team thanks their god for helping him, but none of the losers ever mention the man upstairs - they say they just didn't play well enough. Even cases of premature death are covered: the deceased, we learn, have simply been called to a better place. A masterstroke. Time after time, he gets away with murder (quite often literally), without ever risking the undying adoration of his fans. The few who do turn their back on him are quickly replaced. But we do this in the real world, too: look at how we let our "too-big-to-fail" CEOs get away with having it both ways.

Imagine if *we* could take credit for our successes but socialize our failures; if we could savor the good but not be ruined by bad luck, failure, and disappointment. How freeing it would be to no longer take every perceived hurdle and injustice as a personal affront. We could forgive the trespasses of ourselves and others far more easily with the understanding that none of us is truly at the root of what we do. This would also free us from worrying about others having more or less than us - comparison, in this ideal world, would be meaningless, given the utterly incomparable set of tools and circumstances each of us is working within.

It's a matter of marshaling the selective blindness we usually reserve for those more powerful than us and incorporating it into our own lives (in moderation, of course). The good news is that we do have the tools to do so: as we've discussed, we've learned

not to shake our fists at the clouds when they rain. So whether or not we're successful might just come down to how we define our terms:

Let's say we interpret the back half of "everything happens for a reason" not in its traditional sense (as in, everything happens *to achieve a preordained outcome to which we aren't privy*), but more literally: "everything happens *as a result* of something." The upshot being that there are no uncaused actions.

This might not sound like much, but it's great news: it helps us resist succumbing to self-pity and defeatism: *If the world (or my circumstances) sucks, and there's nothing I can do, it's not worth the effort to try and effect change.* This may be tempting, but it's often intellectually dishonest and stems from our inherent laziness - it takes less effort to wallow in self-pity than to seriously introspect and identify our ruts and shortcomings. Regardless, the upshot isn't that we lack freedom of individual action, but rather that we have no bearing on the circumstances into which we're born, and only slightly more on how those affect us (and vice versa).

This allows us to reclaim not just our stories, but our very futures. Because we don't - and for the most part *won't* - know how our actions, however seemingly unrelated or inconsequential, will impact others for the better, we have no excuse not to contribute to the chain of progress, to keep playing our part - however small - in future successes whose form we might not be able to fathom.

Knowing that life's payoffs are delayed and well-disguised, we must therefore continue to expose ourselves to the unfamiliar and uncomfortable - whether that's in the form of ideas, places, and people in the outside world, or within ourselves, by engaging in meaningful self-reflection. The latter may be less glamorous, but it's no less impactful. In a world where perfectionism, decision paralysis, and risk-aversion are increasingly entrenched, our challenge is to resist these, and take a step, however ungainly, into the

unknown even if - no - *especially* if you don't know what the last step will look like.

And I'm not even saying you can't be nervous, neurotic, and grumpy along the way - far from it. If anything, it's *more* important for us, the habitual ruminators and armchair-theorizers, to stop mindlessly scrolling to go explore. And this, as established earlier, has the added benefit of slowing down our perception of time - in a good way.

Obtaining a wider breadth of experience isn't just resume-filler or a distraction for its own sake; it allows us more creative license as we make sense of the world and relay what we've learned to others. This skillset is vital: contrary to the what we're taught, we are not "nomads," "mercenaries," "lone wolves" - singular, isolated nodes whose only chance of finding happiness lies in being the canniest haggler in the chaos of the global bazaar. We are deeply interconnected and have very real - yet surprisingly basic - primal needs: things like community, trust, laughter, touch. We must ignore any attempts to dissuade us from trying to meet these needs on the basis that they are childish, self-indulgent, or inefficient (whatever that means). We cannot forget that our depression, anxiety, and low-level sense of dread are not our fault; nor are the shame and alienation we experience for suffering and discussing these symptoms. As they say, it is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society. Chances are, those around us are suffering from many of the same issues we do - and others' mistreatment of us can usually be explained by their deficiency in one of the areas mentioned above. Happiness is not zero sum; we depend on each other more than we're taught to think. Being jealous and in competition with each other is mutually destructive - empathy is the opposite. If we can embrace we're all working with tools we didn't choose - for better or worse - we can begin to relate to ourselves and others in a more charitable way. To that end, celebrating any positive outcomes we can salvage from this thresher of entropy, disease, and suffering is not only harmless, but vital for morale. The quality of our interper-

sonal relationships have a majority share in determining our happiness; they are as good a place to start as any. If we're all going to be unreliable narrators, then, let us at least be inspiring, for God's sake. If you ask me, *that's* what our Tia would have wanted.

The proviso to this, of course, is that we remain gracious. Whether we like it or not, the impetus for almost every one of our epiphanies and metamorphoses occur far beyond the limited scope of our existence, spatially or temporally; we are influenced by the decisions of people much further than six degrees - or even six generations away. As such, we can only assume that every link in the chain of successive events, even those in which we had little or no involvement, is of equal importance. The puppet master *we're* beholden to might not be a bearded, blue-eyed ghost in the sky, but the immeasurable chain of successful events leading up to surrounding and shaping our lived experience. But this shouldn't be a problem: we know, from our own experience, that it can be the most fleeting moments, gestures, and serendipities that have the most profound impacts on our lives. It's for this reason - and I'm sure he'll be relieved to hear this - that I've come full circle and decided to forgive my German nemesis. In fact, I've begun to suspect that I'm actually somewhat indebted to him. After all; we simply can't rule out that, *without* Messrs. Zimmer and Simon, et al., my time in South Africa - and, just as crucially, my years of being the cool guy who kept going to South Africa - might never have happened. No hikes, then. No Haka; no sharks, no skinhead baboons; no Paster Busby, no Innocent, no caveman fondling himself in the shared living room. Unthinkable! If nothing else (which may very well prove to be the case), that's material I can't afford to lose.

NOTES

This version of the book is accompanied by “Prehensile,” an explication examining the philosophical, political, and cultural themes present in the work. “Prehensile,” as well as an electronic version of this book, will be available on the book’s website:

ThisIsAfricaBook.shop



All photography and artwork is original and the property of the author. All artwork/illustrations are by Claudia Everest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A very big thanks to Ron, Shathley, Bao, Robin, Flea, Claudia, Sophie, and everyone else who helped with this project.

