

DOUBLE NEGATIVE

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LONDON · NEW YORK

AVAILABLE LIGHT



Just when I started to learn something, I dropped out of university, although this makes it sound more decisive than it was. I slipped sideways. After two years of English Literature and Classics, not to mention History, Sociology and Political Science, as we used to call it, my head grew heavy and I no longer wanted to be a student. Once my studies were over I would have to go to the army, which I did not have the stomach for either, so I registered for my majors at the beginning of the academic year and stopped going to lectures. When my father found out, he was furious. I was wasting my time and his money. The fact that I was living under his roof again, after a year or two of standing on my own feet, made it worse.

How can I explain it now? I wanted to be in the real world, but I wasn't sure how to set about it. My studies had awakened a social conscience in me, on which I was incapable of acting. So I wandered around in town, seeing imperfection and injustice at every turn, working myself into a childish temper, and then I went home and criticized

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my parents and their friends. We sat around the dinner table arguing about wishy-washy liberalism and the wages of domestic workers while Paulina, who had been with my family since before I was born, clattered the dishes away through the serving hatch.

After an argument in which my father threatened to cut off my allowance, I drove over to the Norwood Hypermarket, in the Datsun he'd bought me for my eighteenth birthday, to look at the community notice board. Most of the adverts for part-time employment were for students, which suited me. Technically, I was still a student, while having no real studies to pursue made me flexible.

I flipped through the handwritten notices with their gap-toothed fringes of telephone numbers. Door-to-door salesmen, envelope stuffers, waiters. It might be amusing to watch the middle classes fattening themselves for the slaughter. 'Record shop assistant' was appealing: I knew someone who worked Saturday mornings at Hi-Fi Heaven and she always had the latest albums. But it all seemed so bourgeois. I wanted to get my hands dirty. I would have gone picking tomatoes if that had been an option, following the seasonal harvest like some buddy of Jack Kerouac's.

The ad that caught my eye looked like a note from a serial killer. Not everyone was a graphic artist in those days, a cut-and-paste job still took a pair of scissors and a pot of glue. I tore a number from a full row.

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Jaco Els painted lines and arrows in parking lots. This kind of work was usually done with brushes and rollers; Jaco was faster and cheaper with a spray gun and stencils. He got more work than he could handle on his own.

First impressions? He was my idea of a snooker player, slim and pointed, and a bit of a dandy. Slightly seedy too. He gave me a powdery handshake while he sized me up, working out an angle. Later I discovered that he had acquired the chalky fingertips in the line of duty.

Jaco himself did the skilled part of the job, for what it was worth. He wielded the gun and managed the tanks, which were mounted on the back of a maroon Ranchero. My job was to move the stencils and do the touching up. The stencils were made of hardboard and hinged in the middle for easy transport and storage. They opened and closed like books, oversized versions of the ones I was trying to get away from. This was a library of unambiguous signs. Turn left, turn right, go straight. On a good day, we repeated these simple messages on tar and cement a hundred times.

Being a worker was even harder than I'd hoped. I pinched a dozen blood blisters into my fingers on the first day and breathed in paint fumes until I reeled. The next day I brought along gloves and a mask from my father's workshop. We had to *wikkel*, as Jaco put it. A section of a parking garage would be beacons off or a lane on a ramp closed while we painted, and it had to be done on

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the double. Together we marked out the positions with a chalk line, and then Jaco sprayed while I set out the stencils and touched up the edges with a roller. From time to time, he would move the van and turn over the tape. Music to work by.

Within fifteen minutes of meeting him, I learned that he had employed a string of black assistants before me. 'None of them could take the punch,' he said. 'Now I don't mind working on my own, hard graft never killed anyone, but I'm a person who needs company.' You mean an audience, I thought, a witness. 'I reckon it's worth laying out a bit extra and having someone to shoot the breeze with when I'm on the road.' No black labourer would have ridden in the cab, of course, he would have gone on the back like a piece of equipment.

My new boss was a storyteller with a small, vicious gift: he knew just how to spin out a yarn and tie a slip knot in its end. 'You're bloody lucky you've still got to go to the army,' he told me. 'My camps are over. I volunteered for more, but the brass said no. Suppose they've got to give lighties like you a chance to get shot.' He was full of stories about floppies and terrs. Once he got going, you couldn't stop him. Chilled as I was by the brutality of these stories, they drew me in, time and again, and even made me laugh. In the evenings, as I rubbed the paint off my hands with turps in my mother's laundry, among piles of scented sheets and towels, I felt queasily complicit. But I told myself that this

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was also part of the real world. I was seeking out bitter lessons, undergoing trials of a minor sort, growing up. Such things were necessary.

Strangely enough, of all the violent stories Jaco told me, the one that comes back to me now has nothing to do with the war on the border or patrols in the townships. It concerns a woman who caught the heel of her shoe in the hem of her dress as she alighted from a Putco bus, and fell, and knocked the teeth out of the plastic comb she was holding in her hand.

Jaco and I drove from one end of Johannesburg to the other with *Hotel California* blaring from the speakers. The knives were out but the beast would not die. A revolution was afoot in the retail world: the age of the mall was dawning (although we had not heard the term yet). Corner shops were making way for new shopping centres, and the pioneering ones, already a decade old, were growing. The parking garages were growing too. Jaco could not have been happier. We drove and drove, he talked and I listened, and then I scrambled for the stencils, hurling them open like the Books of the Law, and he zapped them with the spray gun. Turn left, turn right, go straight. It tickled him when I didn't get out of the way in time and he put a stripe of red or yellow over my wrist.

There were hours of calm pleasure, when Jaco went off to buy paint or do his banking, or more secretive duties in the service of the state that he hinted at too broadly,

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and left me behind in some parking lot to join the dots. Working alone, in silence, I sometimes thought I was achieving something after all. In my jackson-pollocked overalls – I had to stop Paulina from washing the history out of them – in a clearing among the cars defined by four red witch’s hats, I was a solitary actor on a stage: a white boy playing a black man. In a small way, I was a spectacle. Yet I felt invisible. I savoured the veil that fell between my sweaty self and the perfumed women sliding in and out of their cars. I flitted across the lenses of their dark glasses like a spy.

One afternoon, I was painting little arcs in the parking area at Hyde Square, turning the sets of parallel lines between the bays into islands, when there was a bomb scare in the centre. Businessmen ran out through the glass doors clutching serviettes like white flags. And then a woman in a plastic cape with half her hair in curlers, who looked as if she had risen from the operating table in the middle of brain surgery with part of her head missing. Everyone flapped about, outraged and delighted, full of righteous alarm. Model citizens. Along the façade of the building was a mural, a line of black figures on a white background, and this separate-but-equal crowd drew my attention. They looked on solemnly, although their eyes were popping. The masses, I thought, the silent majority, observing this self-important European anxiety with Assyrian calm. I took my cue from them. I went on nudging



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new paint into the cracks in the tar, cold-blooded, maliciously pleased.

The bomb turned out to be a carry case of bowls left behind by an absent-minded pensioner.

In time, Jaco's stories got to me. I could laugh off the knowing asides on brainwashing and espionage, which were straight out of *The Ipccress File*, but the nightlife in Otjiwarongo was less amusing the third time around. It shamed me that I said nothing when he launched into one of his routines. Why was I silent? If I am honest, it had nothing to do with needing the money or enjoying the work: I was scared of him.



When I was living in a student house in Yeoville, we had played a party game, an undergraduate stunt called 'The Beerhunter'. A game of chance for six players. It was Benjy, I think, who picked it up on a trip to the States as an exchange student. The ringmaster would take a single can out of a six-pack of beers and give it a good shake. Then the loaded can was mixed in with the others and each player had to choose one and open it next to his head.



Jaco was like a can that had been shaken. For all his jokey patter, he was full of dangerous energies, and if you prodded him in the wrong place, he would go off pop. He pointed the spray gun like a weapon. He was a small man, but he made a fist as round and hard as a club, spattered

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with paint and freckles. I could see him using it to *donner* me, the way he *donnered* everyone else in his stories.

While this was happening, my parents acquired new neighbours. Louis van Huyssteen was a young public prosecutor, just transferred to Johannesburg from his home town of Port Elizabeth. He had a wife called Netta and two small children.

The first thing that struck us about them was how much they braaied. 'It's a holiday thing,' my father said. 'When the chap goes back to work in January, it'll stop.' But they picked up the pace instead. 'Perhaps they still have to connect the stove,' my mother said, 'or organize the kitchen?'

That was not it. They simply liked their meat cooked on an open fire. Minutes after Louis came in from work, long enough to kick off his shoes and pull on a pair of shorts, a biblical column of smoke would rise from their yard, and before long the smell of meat roasting on the coals wafted through the hedge that separated their place from ours. The braai was an old-fashioned one fit to feed an army, half of a 44-gallon drum mounted on angle-iron legs, standing close beside the kitchen door. Often, Netta would lean there in the doorway holding a paring knife or sit on the back step with a bowl in her lap, and they would chat while he turned the meat over on the grill. Once I watched him pump the mince out of a dozen sausages, squeezing



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them in his fist so that the filling peeled out at either end and tossing the skins on the coals. And I saw her lift the folds of her skirt and do a little bump-and-grind routine to an undertone of music, until he pulled her close and slid his hands between her thighs. It sounds like I used to spy on them, I know.

When it came to outdoor living we were not in the same league, but we had the patio and the pool, and my dad could char a lamb chop as well as the next man, so when my mother decided to invite the new neighbours over to break the ice, a pool-side party was the obvious arrangement.



Jaco and I worked on Saturdays – we could get a lot done in the afternoons after the shops closed – and the braai was nearly over when I got home. Usually I flopped into the pool to wash off the sweat and dust of the day, but the Van Huyssteens' sun-browned kids were splashing in the deep end. The toddler could swim like a fish. Her brother, who was a few years older, was dive-bombing her off the end of the filter housing. They looked unsinkable.



I remembered my mother's remark, some personal history gleaned when she went next door to invite them over: 'They used to live near the aquarium.'

By the time I had showered, the girl was asleep on the couch with the damp flex of her hair coiled on a velveteen

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cushion. The boy was reading a photo comic, lying on his back on the parquet near the door, where I used to lie myself when I was his age, keeping cool in the hot weather. Brother and sister. They made the house seem comfortably inhabited. I was grateful suddenly for the parquet; my dad was making money in the craze for wall-to-wall carpets, but he couldn't stand them himself, said they turned any room into a padded cell. Stepping through the sliding doors on to the patio, I paused to feel the heat in the slasto on my soles, enjoying the contrast, and thought: perfect. A perfect summer evening. A breeze carried the scent of my mother's roses from the side of the house, moths and beetles made crazy orbits around the moon of the lamp, the pool water shifted in its sleep like a well-fed animal, breathing out chlorine. The sky over the rooftops, where the last of the light was seeping into the horizon, was a rare pink. The seductive mysteries of things as they are, the scent of the roses and the pale stain in the west ran together in my senses.

I can picture myself there, long-haired and bravely bearded, in patched jeans and a T-shirt. The smell of that evening is still in my clothes.

My parents and their guests were talking, and you could tell by the sated murmur of conversation, the outstretched legs and tilted heads, that the meal had been good. My mother had put something aside for me, although there was so much left over it hardly seemed necessary. While

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I was helping myself to salads, I heard Netta ask for the chicken marinade recipe and my mother fetched an airmail letter pad and wrote it out for her. The recipe was a sort of family secret – it had been devised by Charlie, my Auntie Ellen’s houseboy – but it was shared often and eagerly. Usually, Charlie’s idiosyncrasies were part of the rigmarole of handing on the secret, but tonight my mother made no mention of him at all.

My father and Louis were hanging around the braai, as the men must, and I joined them there with my heaped plate. My dad had a little cocktail fridge from the caravan set up on the patio and I fetched a Kronenbräu from the icy cave of its freezer. The dessert was already on the coals: bananas wrapped in foil. Louis had commandeered the tongs. As he turned the packages idly, the smell of cinnamon and brown sugar melted into the overburdened air.

For a long time the talk was about children, the neighbourhood, the new house, the quality of the local primary school, things I did not have much to say about. I busied myself with the food, drank the beer too quickly, fetched another one. My father told Louis about the new wall-to-wall carpet lines and the problems in the factory with the union. ‘But enough shop talk,’ he said, and moved on to the caravan park in Uvongo where they’d spent their last holiday. It was the height of luxury: there was a power point at every site so you could plug in your generator. ‘The newer vans are moving to electricity. One of these

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days gas will be a thing of the past, you mark my words.’ Then they argued playfully about the relative merits of the South Coast and the Cape as holiday destinations. My father ribbed him a little, and demonstrated that he could speak Afrikaans – ‘*Julle Kapenaars,*’ he kept saying – and Louis took it all in good humour.

It might have gone on like this, until my mom put the leftover woks in a Tupperware and the Van Huyssteens said thank you very much, what a lovely day, and went home. But of course it didn’t.

At some point, Louis slipped into the repetitive storytelling I had to endure every day as I drove around Joburg with Jaco Els. The shift was imperceptible, as if someone had put on a record in the background, turned down low, and by the time you became aware of it your mood had already altered. An odourless poison leaked out of him. His dearest childhood memories were of the practical jokes he had played on the servants. Stringing ropes to trip them up, setting off firecrackers under their beds, unscrewing the seat on the long drop. You could imagine that he had found his vocation in the process. His work, which involved jailing people for petty offences, was a malevolent prank. The way he spoke about it, forced removals, detention without trial, the troops in the townships were simply larger examples of the same mischief.

I was struck by the intimacy of his racial obsession. His prejudice was a passion. It caused him an exquisite

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sort of pain, like worrying a loose tooth with your tongue or scratching a mosquito bite until it bleeds.

In the mirror of his stories, however, the perspective was reversed. While he was always hurting someone, doing harm and causing trouble, he saw himself as the victim. All these people he didn't like, these inferior creatures among whom he was forced to live, made him miserable. It was he who suffered. I understand this better now than I did then. At the time, I was trying to grasp my own part in the machinery of power and more often than not I misjudged the mechanism. *Seid Sand, nicht das Öl im Getriebe der Welt*, my friend Sabine had told me. *Seid unbequem*. Be troublesome. Be sand, not oil in the workings of the world. Sand? Must I be ground down to nothing? Should I let myself be milled? It was abject. Surely one could be a spanner in the works rather than a handful of dust? I'd rather be a hammer than a nail.

These thoughts were driven from my mind by Louis's suffering face, the downturned lips, the wincing eyes. Even his crispy hair looked hurt. You could see it squirming as he combed it in the mornings, gazing mournfully at his face in the shaving mirror.

I could have shouted at him. 'Look around you! See how privileged we are. We've all eaten ourselves sick, just look at the debris, paper plates full of bones and peels, crumpled serviettes and balls of foil, bloody juices. And yet we haven't made a dent in the supply.' The dish on the edge of the fire was full of meat, thick chops and coils of wors soldered to



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the stainless steel with grease. The fat of the land was still sizzling on the blackened bars of the grill. You would think the feast was about to begin.

I knew what had produced this excess. Through the leaves of the hedge, light gleamed on the bonnet of Louis's new Corolla, sitting in his driveway like an enormous piece of evidence.



I should have challenged him to play the Beerhunter. We were drunk enough by then and he had the face for it. Instead, I decided to argue with him, as if we had just come out of a seminar with Professor Sherman and were debating some point in Marx on the library lawns. The details escape me now, they're not important. Racialized capital, the means of production, the operation of the military-industrial complex, I was full of it. 'Just imagine,' I remember saying, 'that you've worked all your life down a bloody gold mine and you still can't afford to put food on the table for your family. Can you imagine? No you can't. That's the problem.'



'The commies at Wits have spoken a hole in your head,' was the gist of his reply. 'What do you know about the world? When you've lived a bit, seen a few things, you'll know better. If your black brothers ever get hold of this country, they'll run it into the ground. It's happened everywhere in Africa.'

My father cracked a few jokes and tried to change the subject. When that failed, he gave me a pointed look, a

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stare that seemed to stretch out his features and make his nose long and sharp. It was the look he used to give me as a boy when I wouldn't listen. Go to your room, it said. Now. Before I lose my temper.

We went from calling each other names to pushing and shoving like schoolboys behind the bicycle sheds. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Netta getting to her feet and my mother turning in her chair to see what the commotion was about.

Louis had what Jaco liked to call a *donner my gesig*. His sorry mug was begging to be hit. I would have done it, I suppose. Apparently I raised the beer bottle like a club. But before I could go further, my father slapped me hard through the face. One blow was all it took to knock the world back into order. Louis straightened his shirt and his mouth. I was told to apologize, which I did. We shook hands.

Then, in fact, I went to my room.

On the way, I stopped in the bathroom to splash my face with cold water. There was a red mark on my jaw. My father was all talk when it came to discipline. He would unbuckle his belt and say, 'Do you want me to give you a hiding?' Don't be ridiculous. He had never raised a hand to me. That he had hit me at all was as shocking as the blow itself. I found the shapes of his fingers on my cheek like the map of a new country.

The Van Huyssteens stayed for coffee, to avoid the implication that the whole day had been a catastrophe.