

THE RESTLESS SUPERMARKET

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A SALESMAN BUGGERING A PINK ELEPHANT (EXCUSE MY BULGARIAN). Not a sight one sees every day, even on the streets of Johannesburg – the Golden City as it were, Egoli as it are, to quote my pal Wessels, the last of the barnacles. As the century declines to a conclusion one has come to expect undignified behaviour as a matter of course, but this was an ‘all-time low’ (as the newspapers would put it). I see it before me now as if it were yesterday.

I say he was a salesman because of the pinstriped suit, the shirt-tails hanging out behind, the tie drooping on his chest like a slice of pizza. Old-fashioned associations on my part. He might just as well have been a popular star, or a lawyer with a passing interest in human rights, or the head of a syndicate for stealing motor cars. These days, the men in lounge suits are good-for-nothings more often than not, while the real businessmen are waltzing around in Bermuda shorts and espadrilles. Whoever he was, he had hold of the elephant on the pavement outside the Jumbo Liquor Market in Kotze Street, gripping its shocking pink buttocks in his paws and grinding his groin against its unyielding fibre-glass tail.

I stopped to stare. A lifetime of practice has turned me into one of the world’s most shameless scrutineers.

The joker’s eyes were screwed shut in rapture, but the elephant’s were like saucers, with painted pupils as black as draughtsmen rattling in them. The beast’s pointed ears stood on end like wistful wings and its trunk curled an outraged question mark over its little gasping mouth. Its eyes met mine without blinking.

‘Hey, Arch! Check what Darryl’s doing.’ Spoken by another ill-suited

entrepreneur fumbling for a wallet while the cashier rang up a carton of Camel cigarettes and a bottle of Red Heart rum.

The Jumbo Liquor Market, as its name suggests, is a 'convenience store' in the American mould. Sliding glass doors open directly onto the pavement so that the passing trade can totter in and out with a minimum of effort. From till to gutter in three easy steps. Arch came out to see what Darryl was up to. Arch, Darryl and the Third Man. A little triumvirate, unholy and unwise, but citizens nevertheless of the conurbation in which I find myself.

Bump and grind from the rear.

Arch said, 'Ag, stop it man Darr. You making your name tawty.' (Just who or what 'tawty' is, I cannot say: it's in none of the reference works and no one will enlighten me. Perhaps a South African counterpart of that scoundrel Mudd?)

Darr slumped down on the elephant's back and spoke passionately into one outflung ear: 'Suffer, baby, suffer.'

Snorts of laughter from Arch and the Third Man. What would *his* name be? Some monosyllabic chunk no doubt, some unfeeling stump like Gav or Ern or Gord. People were starting to gather. Shoppers from the supermarket on the next corner, drinkers from the verandah of the Chelsea Hotel across the way, the twilight children, drawn out in broad daylight by the spectacle, a couple of continental gentlemen in open-neck shirts. As representative a cross-section of conurbanites as you could wish to find.

Suffer, baby, suffer. It was the punchline of a Wessels joke, I'm sure, entertained reluctantly like all the rest. I never forget a punchline – but I'm damned if I can remember a joke. Except for that one about Rubber Dinghy Sithole. 'What's black and goes with the stream?' I've spoilt the effect by putting it back to front. It must be all of fifteen years since Erasmus at Posts and Telecommunications told it to me, around the time Rhodesia attained its majority, and for some reason it stuck. The pink elephant, I noticed, was chained to a parking meter, expired.

Right on cue, the Queen of Sheba staggered out of the alley between the Jumbo and Hypermeat. She had a throne there, a sponge-rubber armchair

the colour of urine, upon which she sometimes reclined wearing a paper crown from a Christmas cracker and a robe of threadbare carpeting. She was drawn to Darr at once. As she gazed at him, she stuck a hand through the armhole of her dress and absent-mindedly rearranged her breasts. He huffed and puffed and oohed and aahed, and opened one eye to gauge the response of his growing audience.

Hypermeat was flogging half a dead sheep @R12.95 a kilogram, and sirlion steaks @ R6.95 a cut. Doing a roaring trade, I suppose. 'Nice meat' said a blackboard, also chained to a parking meter, with ten minutes on the dial.

The Queen staggered closer. She smelt like the bottom of the barrel. Seeing that the rear end of the elephant was already occupied, she approached the front and tried to clamber up like a mahout. Darr kept thumping away. An 'ugly situation' all right, and bound to get uglier. Arch saw it coming. He took Darr by the arm and tried to drag him away, but was shrugged off. The Third Man, hurrying to Arch's assistance, dropped his wallet, and coins scattered across the pavement. The children swooped. I put my foot down on a one-rand coin and examined the little ones to see if there was a deserving case among them.

The Queen got a leg over the elephant's neck and sprang up, overbalanced, grabbed at an ear, which snapped off in her hands, and plunged over the other side. Her head struck the fender of the [Henry] Ford parked at the kerb. The car began to shriek; the Queen, God save her, was silent. Darryl came to a shuddering halt. A tiny peep, the sound a crib toy might make if you squeezed it, issued from the elephant's trunk.

'Meesta Ferreira! Meesta Ferreira! Pleece comb tew da frount!' the cashier said urgently into a microphone. Mr Ferreira's face appeared in a diamond of glass in the door at the back of the shop.

Enough. I kicked the coin down a stormwater drain and hurried on to the Café Europa. I had seen enough to know what would inevitably follow: *skop*, *skiet* and *donner*, and their corollaries, *snot* and *trane*. (These are Wesselisms for trouble and tears, and the fact that I stoop to them is a sign that better words have failed me.) Mr Ferreira arrives on the scene, thrusting out the managerial bulges of his pink blazer. Arch and Darr

wrestle. The Queen bleeds unconsciously. Voices and fists are raised. The Queen comes round and begins to wail. Her courtiers creep out of their holes and try to console her by falling over her and tugging at her clothing. Speaking in indigenous tongues, roaring and cursing, laying on of hands and feet. Mr Ferreira enters into the spirit by taking out his revolver. The Third Man trots across the street, opens the door of a black sedan (one of those ubiquitous abbreviations that issue in an unbroken line from the Bayerische Motoren Werke) and reaches for something under the driver's seat. The owner of the stricken Ford comes running with a serviette tucked into his pullover, and examines the dented fender as if it is a wound in his own flesh. Multilingual sobbing. Four-letter words fly, the whole dashed alphabet. The air goes dark with obscenity, the leading players are obscured by it, the bystanders grow restless, Darryl is still darrylling away in the gloom, Arch is arching, the manager managing. And then warning shots, Your Honour, falling down.

In a word: chaos.

One Sunday morning not too long ago, on an overgrown plot in Prospect Road, I saw a body in the weeds, under a shroud of pages from the *Sunday Times*. I saw it from the window of my own flat, where I stood with a carton of long-life milk in my hand, and I could almost smell the pungent scent of the kakiebos crushed by its fall. It lay among the rusted pipes, blackened bricks and outcrops of old foundations that mark every bit of empty land in this city, as if a reef of disorder lay just below the surface, or a civilization had gone to ruin here before we ever arrived.

What do I mean by 'we'? Don't make me laugh.

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Wessels was waiting for me as usual in the Café Europa. Properly: Martinus Theodosius Wessels – but I'm afraid I think of him as Empty. Empty Wessels make the most noise. Or in this case, *makes* the most noise. Appropriately, it grates the grammatical nerve-endings. Errors of number are Wessels's speciality.

'Yes yes, Mr Tearle,' he said through a jet of smoke. 'Hullo-ss.' Perhaps

the sibilant centre of his own surname created this propensity for letting off steam. Before I could even sit down, he was rootling in my shopping-bag, trying to put me off my food. 'Salamis, hey. Sweating like a pig in there.'

Salamis? Rang a bell. I made a note to look it up.

'You'll never guess what I just saw.'

'Me first,' he said, 'I've got a major something to tell you.'

'So long as it's not a joke.'

'Uh-uh. Sit down, you making me nervous.'

'Take your foot off my chair.' The foot in question was encased in plaster of Paris. I'd known Wessels for several years, but I'd only recently made the acquaintance of this grisly extremity. The toes were squashed together like foetuses in a bottle, and there were lumps of plaster stuck to the hairs curling out of them. He made a performance of moving crutch and limb and dusting the plastic seat cover with a serviette.

Moçes appeared at my shoulder. Properly: Moses Someone-or-Other. I'd added the hammer and sickle because he was from Moçambique. A little joke between myself and my inner eye, entirely lost on the flapping ear.

'Have a dop,' said Wessels. He ordered himself a brandy.

I ordered my usual tea and specified separate bills. Wessels was obsessed with getting me drunk. Ditto himself, with more success. When he'd broken his ankle, falling down somewhere in a stupor, I asked him, 'Did it leak when you broke it?' But he didn't get it. He had the most fantastic excuse, though: said he'd hurt himself trying to effect a citizen's arrest on a cutpurse outside the Mini Cine.

(What sort of a name is that for a cinema? They might as well call it the Silly Billy. I won't be surprised if it goes out of business.)

'So what's the story?'

'The Café Europa,' waving his crutch recklessly, 'is closing down.'

'You're joking.' But I could see that for once he wasn't.

'At the end of the month, the doors will close on our little club for the last time. The end of an error.'

He mispronounces things deliberately to get under my skin. The last day of 1993 was less than a month away.

‘Shame man,’ Wessels went on. ‘Tony told me this morning. I wished you was here to hear it with your own ears. Because you our main man and everythink.’

‘God forbid.’

So the New Management was throwing in the towel. Properly: Anthony, pronounced ænθəni: for a reason I could never fathom. Popularly: Tony. But tony he wasn’t, so I preferred to think of him as the New Management, which he was.

I called Moçes back. I said I would have a whiskey after all, with an ‘e’ please, deciding to indulge. Time was when you couldn’t get anything stronger at the Café Europa than a double espresso. On high days and holidays, when grandchildren were born or horses came in, Mrs Mavrokordatos – the Old Management, although we never thought of her that way – might slip you an ouzo under the counter, in a thimble of a glass with a bunch of grapes and a twist of vine etched on it. That was before her own standards slipped in the direction of the shebeen.

‘Did he say why?’

‘Didn’t have to. No customers, no profits. This kind of place isn’t *in* any more.’

‘What about Errol and Co? I thought the New Management was catering for them. Specifically.’

‘Get real. They don’t spend their bucks here. They shoot pool, they sit outside in the sun, they have a couple of pots. Half the time they don’t even pay for those – it’s cheaper to bring your own. I see them topping up their glasses with nips from the girls’ bags. They think they clever, but I got experience in covert operations.’

‘My eye.’ He can hear a cork pop at fifty paces.

‘I saw it coming. Three years ago already I told Mrs Mav changing with the times won’t save us. We’ve had our chips.’

Wessels had taken to echoing me in the most infuriating manner. Still does. He swirls my sentiments around in his cavernous interior until they’re completely out of shape and mixed up with his own, and then he booms them back at me, made discordant and disagreeable, and reeking

of the ashtray. *I* was the one who said: Changing with the times is not for us. Staying the same is our forte. He never gave the matter a thought; he was too busy feeding his face and ogling the coloured girls, most of them young enough to be his daughters. To tell the truth, I was hardly surprised that the Café was closing down. I'd been predicting it for years.

'Our days are numbered.'

I'd said that too! And in my mind's eye, the numbered days were perfect spheres, like pool balls.

The pool room was through an archway. It was always dark in there, because the blinds were never opened, and when the fluorescent tubes over the tables glowed, the surrounding darkness thickened. Now Errol came suddenly into focus in the smoke-marbled light. He took a cloth from his pocket and drew his cue tenderly through it. The thing was his pride and joy. He'd tried to impress me once with the name of the manufacturer, but it meant nothing to me. He carried it in two parts, in a case lined with velvet, and would screw them together with the practised efficiency of an assassin.

Moçes brought my whiskey, John Jameson's on the rocks. Don't suppose that this semi-literate peasant appreciated the distinction between Scotch and the real thing: 'with an "e"' was shorthand, drummed into him with difficulty.

'To us!' said Wessels.

'Absent friends!' I regretted that afterwards, because it set his cogs whirring.

The whiskey made me sentimental. I don't like sentiment – it's one of the reasons I seldom indulge – but Wessels was waffling on about the good old days and I found myself looking around me with new eyes. Now that the existence of the place was threatened, I saw it in a new light. I would have to look at everything properly, preserve the details that the years had somehow failed to imprint on my mind.

Décor. Tables and chairs – travesties of their former selves since the reupholstering, but still affectingly receptive to the contours of the familiar human body. The espresso machine on the counter. Even the new fixtures

I had despised so much – the venetian blinds where I would have preferred to see the old brocade, the fake stained glass of the chapel where the one-armed bandits resided, the posters of football teams – all suddenly felt fragile. But not the television sets. There was a limit to everything.

The impending loss that grieved me most was Alibia, the painted city that covered an entire wall of the Café. I imagined workmen in overalls slapping polyvinyl acetate over our capital without a second thought. It should be moved to a new location, I decided: sawn up into blocks, numbered and packed, transported to safety, and reassembled. The Yanks were all for that sort of thing, carving up the world and recycling it as atmosphere. I don't know why I was thinking this way. After all, it was no Florentine fresco, it was of no historical significance, nothing important had ever happened in this room. There was no point in preserving any of it. It was merely – that phrase so beloved of the Lost and Found columns came into my head – 'of great sentimental value'.

'If these walls could speak, hey,' Wessels said as if he'd read my thoughts.

'If they could speak English, you mean.' Then I might have asked them: what is that stuff you're covered with? Apart from the one with the mural, the walls were papered, and the pattern had always bothered me. What did it represent? Rising damp? Autumn leaves? 'Besides, ears are common enough among walls, but mouths are rare.'

'Now that's above my fireplace,' said Wessels, and looked baffled.

'Never mind. I wonder what will open here when we're gone?'

'A whorehouse.' As if he knew for a fact. 'Or a disco.' He made Christmas lights with his fat fingers.

'So long as it's not another chicken outlet,' I said. 'We've got enough of those. Though why they should be called chicken outlets, I don't know. It sounds like the orifice through which a fowl passes an egg.'

'I know this tone of voice,' Wessels said, too familiarly by half. 'It's your letter-to-the-editor tone. We should write a letter to the *Star*. We haven't done that for ages. Hey, Mo-siss.'

He ordered another round, make that doubles, and I didn't protest. These were extraordinary circumstances.

‘Dear Editor,’ Wessels dictated, steeping his fingers and gazing up at the ceiling in what I understood to be a parody of my own attitude. ‘It have come to my attention that Europa Caffy, last outpost of symbolization in the jungly flatland that go by the name of Hillbrow, most densely populated residential hairier in the southern hemisphere ...’

And growing denser by the day. More people and fewer motor vehicles. No one who could afford to drive a car wanted to come here any more.

I have never been able to hold my liquor, as they say, whereas Empty Wessels can hold a gallon (an ancient measure for liquids) in each leg without getting plastered. The walls have ears. I found myself going over the porous surface of Wessels’s face as incredulously as I had just examined the wallpaper. Another crumbling ruin. His face sat like a lump of porridge on the cracked calyx of his old-fashioned suit with its ridiculously wide lapels. A drinker’s nose, a real grog berry, with little sesamoid nodules in the wings of the nostrils. His features were all too big. You could say of him, without a hint of the figurative, that he was all ears. They were large and fleshy in the lobe and full of gristle, tufty in the middle, with tops like the curve of fat on a pork chop. It made sense to me that Empty Wessels should have these meaty handles attached to his head. Auditory meatus. To coin a false etymology.

Pitcher ~ pitchy ~ plague ~ plaguy. The whiskey beginning to talk. Then there was the hair. Also too big, obscenely thick for a man of his age, and worn in the ducktail style. The rear end of a bloody Muscovy. He dyes it black. Why does it vex me so?

‘What’s to become of us?’ he was still dictating, mocking my accent. ‘We part of the furniture around here.’

Speak for yourself. The whole of his person appears to be covered with the same stiff horsehair that sprouts from his ears. The way it sticks out of him, you could believe that he was stuffed with it. You wouldn’t be surprised to see a shiny spring burst out of the fabric stretched over his belly.

‘Those were the days. Yours faithfully.’

He has all the finesse of an ottoman, I thought. He had stopped speaking at last and was gazing at me over the spatulate ends of his fingers. You

piece of wood. You wing-eared lounge. You stool. And then by anatomical association: You clot. You thrombus. ‘Those were the days?’ You have no idea what the days were. By the time you arrived on the scene, the days were no longer what they were supposed to be. That it should come to this. That I should end up with Wessels, of all people, up the creek in a leaky kayak. It was a bitter irony. I had often consoled myself that things were not as bad as they might have been, but now it came home to me that they were actually worse.

The same canoe coming and going (5): kayak.

Wessels called Moçes to turn up the volume on the television set. News from the Convention for a Democratic South Africa. For some time now, Wessels had been making a show of interest in national affairs. Oddly enough, I had a feeling he was trying to impress the waiters. CODESA this and CODESA that. The country was disappearing behind a cloud of acronyms. As for the décor at the ‘World Trade Centre’ – how could one expect proper political decisions to be made in those dreadful surroundings? The place looked like a brothel.

I excused myself.

Alcohol does not agree with me. It argues, it presents opposing viewpoints – like that Freek Robinson on the television. In the Gentlemen’s room I scrutinized, as I always did, the peculiar geometrical pattern in the frosted glass of the window. In the beginning, it had reminded me of those abstract designs in nails and string that were thought so modern when I was starting out at Posts and Telecommunications. But then I’d begun to think of it as a hide stretched between stakes, the skin of some animal kept under glass.

I turned to the wall above the washbasin where the mirror was meant to be (I had seen it there myself as recently as the day before): four small holes and a faint outline of grime showed where it had been secured to the tiles. Someone had unscrewed it and carried it off. I couldn’t believe it was gone. In the shiny tiles, my image wavered. I wet my fingers under the tap and ran them over what was left of my hair, then dried the bumpy top of my head with a wad of paper towels, staring down the pale ghost.