

WHO? ME? A RACIST?

Michael Holman

I am starting to miss apartheid. I can no longer get a room at the **Mount Nelson**, or a compartment on the Blue Train. Flights are full, and my dream of a cottage at **Hermanus** is receding as rapidly as prices are rising.

I stood in the immigration queue at Jan Smuts airport, cross and exhausted after a ten-hour flight, and reflected on these **tribulations**. But at the heart of my discontent was something more profound.

I was missing the tension of a township funeral. I recalled the electric atmosphere at the Johannesburg Market Theatre during the brutal decade of the 1980s. Just being part of the audience, watching a Barney Simon production about contemporary South Africa, seemed to be a political statement. But it was more than this. I missed the stress that bonded the friendships forged by **adversity**.

As I stood, the queue hardly moving, I realised that Nelson Mandela's **inauguration** marked the day **they shot my fox**.

Apartheid was the issue which allowed moral certainty, the glorious conviction that right and wrong was black and white. These are now grey days in South Africa, thank goodness. The euphoria of the election has faded, and those certainties, those moral **absolutes** are harder to define.

In their place are admirable plans to build a million houses a year, or bring electricity to the townships. But 'Forward with the Reconstruction and Development Plan' does not have the same ring as 'Free Nelson Mandela'.

When apartheid was swept away, we journalists made the best of the good news. We exchanged anecdotes at The Ritz, the northern suburbs restaurant that served as an informal press club, its entrance guarded by a man with an Uzi, although his colleague preferred a sawn-off shotgun. To the secret regret of some of us, it was the closest we got to violence.

Nelson Mandela's inauguration was marked with a celebratory dinner and a poem written in honour of the occasion:

*O what joy to be a hack,
As power shifts from white to black!
O what bliss to be alive,
When a British pound can buy rands five.*

So I miss apartheid. Perhaps the immigration officer detected my **malaise**, as I stood in the queue at Jan Smuts. The queue was black, for most of the passengers had come off a flight from Angola. Only two desks were open at

Mount Nelson
luksushotel i Cape
Town
Hermanus smuk
sydafrikansk
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inauguration
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absolutes
uomstødelige fakta
malaise utilpashed

mzungus personer
af europæisk
afstamning (bantu)

the immigration counter. A third was marked 'SA passport holders only'.

A white immigration officer stands, arms folded, in the hall, surveying the scene. I catch his eye, and thus a conversation begins. It is conducted in the sign language of *mzungus* in Africa, expressing their frustrations and impatience. Gone are the days when such irritations could be expressed aloud. But through the silent changes of expressions, a lifted eyebrow here, a fleeting grimace there, a twitch of the shoulders, an upward glance to the heavens, we exchange views. I catch his eye. 'See?' his expression is saying. 'This is what happens. Let one in, and then they all want to come.'

I gave a discreet 'Bit of a nuisance this' gaze at the heavens.

His lips pursed a fraction. We've got to live with this ... all right for you, you are just a visitor.'

But colour bonding was having its effect. A split second tilt of his chin in the direction of the SA passport holders' desk spoke volumes. Join the other queue,' the gesture said, 'it will be quicker.'

I dislike racists and queue jumpers with equal passion, but ten hours in economy class, sandwiched between fellow passengers with whom I had lost the battle of the arm rests, drained my patience and undermined my principles.

But I needed reassurance. I made a quick side to side glance as if to say 'Who, me?'

He maintained eye contact. 'Get a move on, before someone sees us.' I had hesitated too long. A terrible suspicion was growing in his mind. But for both of us, it was too late to turn back.

I had picked up my bag, avoiding eye contact with the patient travellers in front of me. My fractional hesitation, however, tells him volumes. Twenty yards now divides us, as I move to the shorter, adjoining queue, but his upper lip has a momentary sneer.

I look away.

'Aagh you liberals.' I almost hear a contemptuous rolling of the 'r', the more pronounced for having unwittingly assisted someone whom he thought might be sympathetic.

'Aagh you liberals. Full of talk.'

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ANALYSIS: ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- 1) In what ways was life in South Africa easier for our narrator during apartheid...
 - a.... in terms of privileges and opportunities?
 - b.... in terms of morals?
 - 2) How is the community of international journalists portrayed in the text?
 - 3) Contrast and compare the "color bonding" between the narrator and the immigration officer with "the stress that bonded the friendships forged by adversity" earlier in the text.
 - 4) Comment on the queue jumping.
 - a. What makes our narrator switch queues?
 - b. What makes him hesitate before doing so?
 - 5) Explain the immigration officers reaction at the end of the story.
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