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Amosquito

Jan Dednam

Johannesburg City, Gauteng, South Africa

It is one of the largest man-made forests in the world, the largest city that is *not* situated along or upon any waterway of any sort. Why? Because of money. Somebody literally tripped over a piece of rock sticking out of the ground (like the tip of an iceberg) and discovered gold. The next thing you know, there were kilometers of shafts and tunnels submerged deep underneath the ground like a serious termite problem, the termite mine dumps protruding from the ground like clumsy monuments. The gold that once lay beneath the Earth is now above the Earth, on everybody's fingers, in everybody's teeth, in the reserve bank somewhere in the U.S. of bloody A., and even in *Sambuca Gold*. Yebo! They use real gold flakes in *Sambuca* gold.

All that gold was once the "waterway" on which Johannesburg squatted. Who needs water when one has gold? Not to mention Coca-Cola. Hearsay or rumour has it that Johannesburg was also the first city in the world to use Auto Teller Banking machines. How apt if it were true.

And lest we forget, outside of a war zone Johannesburg is now the most dangerous place to live in the world where crime and social decay are rife. It is here where self-righteous people await any opportunity to hoot at their fellow citizens on the roads. Everybody thinks that they are right and that everybody else is wrong. How can everybody be right if everybody is wrong? And even if someone knows that they are in the wrong, they will not admit it. If they are not caught they believe themselves to be innocent regardless of the crime they have full knowingly committed. They duck and dive and pass the buck. There is no self-responsibility. There is no self-honesty. There is no love and there is no care. Well, there is a little bit, but one has to search to find it. The citizens are termites that work for themselves and not for each other. How long could a nest possibly last like that?

It's not like the rest of the world is any better, but Johannesburg is a city with a particularly dark and sinister past. It epitomizes urban lifestyle and social decay. Murder, rape, theft, drugs, unemployment, homelessness, and child prostitution are a few factors that have become topics of discussion in everyday conversation. Fear lurks on every corner like a Greek café. The government is filled with corruption and is more concerned with smoking laws, parking fines, and squeezing every last cent out of the rich and the affluent (who are predominantly white) than actually running the nation and sorting out the real criminals. It's understandable. The whites abused the blacks and now it's payback time. The part that's not understandable,

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though, is that the majority of the blacks are poorer now than ever before. The African National Congress is supposed to be taking the money from the whites to redistribute the wealth amongst the general population and look after the nation as a whole. We all know that it is not happening like that, is it now?

Government officials drive big cars and live the lives of Mafia stars. The police force is more a part of the crime force than an organization which serves and protects. Policemen are brutal, accept bribes, and run brothels that deal in child prostitution. At the same time more and more people are becoming homeless and have to shit in the street because the government can't "afford" to provide even the most basic needs such as housing and sanitation.

Nevertheless, Johannesburg is the economic powerhouse of Africa. The New York City of the most doomed continent on Earth. The "Bad Apple."

Pretty negative, huh?

Ironically, there are many churches in Johannesburg, monuments of the past when the white regime had pulled the utopian wool over the eyes of its white sheep. An influence, which carried through from the Europeans and so-called Christians who had colonialised South Africa in the first place back in the sixteen hundreds. Some of the suburbs have an incredible number of churches. In the suburb of Westdene, where I grew up, there are two small roads running alongside and parallel to one another. Both these roads have churches in them. The suburb alone has four or five churches.

Sophiatown and Triomf

Then there's what is now called Sophiatown, adjacent to Westdene. This suburb was once before named Sophiatown, a suburb inhabited mainly by black labourers who would work for the whites in the neighbouring suburbs. Sophiatown was also inhabited by a few coloureds and some whites. The suburb was a melting pot of artists and musicians, journalists as well as doctors. It was a mixed suburb. The perfect model for a nonracist society. Then the white government of the time decided that this booming subculture of mixed races was too much of a threat to their idea of how people should live. Whites and blacks living together in the same streets was simply ludicrous, let alone the concept of their actually getting along.

The police came in and literally razed Sophiatown to the ground over a couple of days. The black residents were crammed into trucks like cattle and moved to Meadowlands (Soweto). The coloureds were moved to Western Township closer by, probably because they were only "half" black. Sophiatown was then rebuilt, moved into by conservative whites and renamed *Triomf*, the Afrikaans word for triumph. The vibrant, jazzy nightlife and entertainment of Sophiatown was replaced by a different form of nightlife and entertainment once the name changed to Triomf. I remember seeing gangs of white kids roaming the streets of Triomf at night, looking for a lone black person, male or female, so they could beat the crap out of them. This practice was commonly known as *kaffir* (offensively, nigger) *bashing*.

Gee, I wonder why blacks now have such little respect for whites.

Triomf also had many churches. Churches, which belonged to the N.G. Kerk — the Dutch Reformed Church — which basically consisted of conservative followers who believed in the doctrine of Calvinism. Calvinism elaborated on Luther's ideas of predestination, where certain people are elected by God to salvation and others

are rejected by him and consigned to eternal damnation. So white Europeans who invented Christianity and developed Calvinism were conveniently elected to salvation it seems, and simply put, all the others could go to hell. This mind-set inevitably meant that these Calvinist whites of Triomf would carry a Bible under their arms on Sundays while booting their black gardeners around “their” properties for the rest of the week.

Nevertheless, it goes without saying that *every* Sunday morning, like clockwork, one would be woken up by the ringing of church bells calling their folk from suburbs all over. At eight o’clock sharp the bells would start waking the neighbourhood like an alarm clock from the heavens above. Dogs have sensitive hearing. Church bells and dogs do not belong in the same neighbourhood. The dogs would howl and go crazy. Deaf dogs would howl because they noticed their buddies next to them howling. Dogs in suburbs further away, which wouldn’t have howled because of the bells, howled regardless because hearing all those other dogs howling at the same time excited them so much that they just had to break out in song too. Similar to the way humans feel compelled to break out in song at rock concerts.

Together the bells and the dogs would sing in chorus for no less than one complete minute. The snowball effect being that everybody would wake up, whether they went to church on Sundays or not. Those who were doing the “right thing” would be ready and go to church. The “sinners” would stay at home and in bed, but awake nevertheless. Some “sinners” would feel a pang of guilt for not heeding God’s call. Others did not give a shit. The point being that no matter who you were, you knew that it was Sunday. And the whole of Sunday it would feel different. One could smell the “Sundayness.” Even the sunlight, the shadows, and the wind felt different. The anticipation of work and school the next day pounding quietly in the back of one’s mind.

Nowadays, now that the whites have lost their power, organized inhumane crime has dropped and normal crime has escalated. Nothing else has changed much, except that now the godly chiming of church bells and the chanting of the canine boys’ choir at eight o’clock on Sunday mornings harmonizes with the daunting squabble of car and house alarms. And Triomf, once again, has become Sophiatown, even though it doesn’t even remotely resemble the original Sophiatown, and never will.

Melville

I went to primary school in Melville, a suburb on the other side of Westdene (relative to Sophiatown). Melville also has a few churches, but it seems more justified because the suburb was always a bit more liberal in its stance towards racism. This could probably be because of the fact that the South African Broadcasting Corporation moved in down the road. This resulted in many writers, actors, and other artists seeking residency close by. Melville is close by. I always found artists and creative people to be generally more empathetic and more humane than those of the corporate rat-race world where emotion and care are considered to be more of a weakness than a virtue. Although I must say that the liberals’ dogs still barked at black people walking by. This is the type of environment that I grew up in. Westdene was my home suburb. Triomf was the neighbouring and predominantly conservative Afrikaans suburb for all the racists. And then of course there was the more liberal suburb of Melville, where I went to school. Melville was also my after-school-hours playground.

Melville was hip and still is. Liberals attracted more liberals, and Melville became known as a laid-back place for all the *arti fatti*-type people. A place for all the poor people with the romantic notion of becoming well-known artists in whichever field of expression they specialized. A different, collective attitude, which turned the suburb into a city-locked village. An attitude which was also to have a huge effect on the nightlife and entertainment world in Johannesburg.

In a city and country that's more like a Madmax movie free-for-all where lawlessness and chaos rule, Melville's mellow dreamy atmosphere has drawn many people to it. And we all know that many people equals many moneys. Melville is thus going through a gold rush — people, from restaurateurs to artists to hard-core property developers juggling huge portions of money to hardened criminals doing some affirmative shopping. All because of a little suburb where one could once go to relax in an otherwise hurried world.

Him

The first time I saw *him* was on a Saturday morning somewhere in the year of 1988. Melville Main Road was humming with people preparing themselves for a lovely day outdoors. I was fifteen years old, sitting in my mother's car waiting for her to do her banking. She specifically turned back to me as she left and told me to move the car if I noticed a traffic cop within the vicinity. We were parked in a no-parking zone. That was why I was to remain in the car.

Why people wait until Saturday mornings to do their banking amazes me. The queues on Saturdays are always longer than the queues of other days during the week. One therefore spends more time in the bank, which strangely enough results in severe bouts of impatience amongst the citizens. This inevitably gets taken out on the bank tellers who are only doing their jobs and quite frankly don't give a fuck about anybody's problems, but have to pretend that they do. All in all, banking on Saturdays tends to spoil *everybody's* weekend, unless one is depositing one billion tax-free U.K. pounds, in which case there's a lot more than a weekend to look forward to.

Nevertheless, I waited patiently in the car while Mom waited patiently in a queue inside some bank. I sat there watching the people and the way they were doing their thing. Some were ambling along happily doing their shopping. Others were storming around with scowls on their faces and cursing under their breath as they got caught up behind those ambling along happily.

Then I noticed *him*.

At first I thought that he was possibly mentally retarded. He wasn't though. He was black and he was what one would call a hobo. A black hobo. Homeless, jobless, and uneducated. Destitute. He was destitute, and if you are sick of hearing the word *destitute* . . . destitute. *Destitute. Destitute. Destitute.*

Nothing new in suburban Johannesburg around 1988. Apparently nothing shocking either. The general consensus amongst the whites then being that black homeless people belong to that particular lifestyle like flies belong to shit. He was dressed in soiled and caked clothing and looked like a medieval peasant. An extra, fresh off the *Braveheart* movie set. He had a full, unopened bottle of cane spirits in his hand, although it was so obvious that it had not been his first. He was walking out of the bottle store in front of where our car was parked. Walking? He dragged his feet

along, which were covered with old, ripped North Star takkies (sneakers). Sometimes he would have a limp and sometimes a hobble. I suppose it depended on his begging pitch and how much sympathy he felt like squeezing out of the rich pale-faces.

This man was a beggar by profession, though on that specific Saturday in white South Africa he was making a scene and staggering about aimlessly. Hardly the thing to do publicly at the time, especially if one was black. His face was scorched and parched from too much drinking in the sun. In fact, take away the sun and he probably still would have looked that way — his body parched and dehydrated from the inside out from the copious amounts of alcohol he had consumed over the years. His liver must have been like a dried-out sponge that would've crumbled like short bread if dropped to the floor. His kidneys no doubt fragile, like two tiny Chinese porcelain cups. His eyes were glazed and he drooled from the mouth. It was Saturday morning and he was out of it. How could somebody drink so early in the morning? was the question I asked myself. Later in life I would discover that as far as he was concerned, it was still Friday night.

I observed as he mumbled and laughed quietly to himself. His laugh was hoarse, as was his voice. The deep gargle of a very thick and gooey substance could be heard echoing from deep within his vocal pipes, as drunken slurs were emitted from his lips. Not to say that I understand even one African language, but he had reached the universal stage of drunkenness, a state in which any human being, rich or poor, black or white, would sound the same.

The passersby, white and black, had mixed emotions on encountering this drunken Saturday morning spectacle. Other drunk blacks hanging around the bottle store laughed at him and egged him on. They didn't seem homeless, but they did have an only partially-employed air about them.

Staring children were dragged from the scene by shocked parents. One little girl even started kicking and screaming the way kids do when they don't want to leave the show, but their parents do. Some more fortunate adults without children, or who didn't have their children with them at the time, could afford to get away with walking straight on ahead without noticing a thing. They probably made a point of noticing other things like the smooth tar of the pavement directly in front of them or the dog crossing the road, which was conveniently in the opposite direction. Other citizens visibly showed fear and disgust towards this encounter with *die swart gevaar* — the black danger. They lost the step in their stride as they made wide, staggering arcs of disbelief around him, as if he were a diseased freak about to spontaneously combust. Some even stepped into the road to avoid this disturbance of the Saturday morning peace.

Two huge young lads, of the braaivleis (barbecues) and rugby variety with bulging stomachs that were probably blocked by too much red meat consumption, happened upon the scene. They gesticulated and cursed him with disgust, making it visibly clear to the present public that they personally did not appreciate this drunk *kaffir* falling all over what they believed to be their pavement. The drunks hanging around the bottle store disappeared into the walls to avoid being detected by these two abusive organisms. They stood with their huge bodies in his space. So close, it should be said, that they could smell the stale and rotten odours, which were being produced by the factories within his system. This probably disgusted them and provoked them even more. They were no doubt hoping that he would put so much as

one of his toes in the wrong place so that they could beat him to a pulp. His drunken state made him totally oblivious to their existence, never mind their presence. However, bullies are strange creatures and can work themselves into even more of a rage if one ignores them. They started shouting at him as he carried on doing his thing, mumbling and gurgling contentedly to himself.

Frustrated by their lack of power over a being, which by their definition was at the bottom of their respect list, the one oaf grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, but let go instantly as if he were wearing some sort of asshole repellent. The asshole rubbed his hand on his pants in disgust, but had also finally managed to get his attention. He looked at these two gorillas standing offensively in his space and was not sure what they wanted. He stared at them and they at him. No words were said until finally he extended his begging hand towards them, offering them a place in which they could put any donations that he thought they were about to give him.

They jumped back as if he were extending a hot poker towards their eyes. Their mouths frantically and uncontrollably released strings of high-speed words, which to this day are words that I do not know the meanings of. It was at that point in time that they realized that they had to either physically squash him because now he had crossed the line, or they had to leave the scene with clean, uncontaminated hands. Their impression being that if they did so much as to just touch him, they would have to deal with more than simply coming into contact with his blood. Unintentionally I'm sure, they visibly showed their predicament. They desperately wanted to beat him up, but couldn't because in their minds he was too disgusting to touch. Eventually, these two mammoth youngsters made a decision and managed to walk away from him slowly without having the opportunity to release much frustration and anger (their dog at home must have taken a beating that day). They still half turned back towards him with distaste smeared all over their faces, ensuring that their sentiments were publicly expressed, while they muttered with animation to each other. Finally, they managed to turn around all together and focus on where they were going, although they were still shaking their heads and punching their hands with contempt — the one still rubbing his "contaminated" hand on his pants.

A short-term form of feeling a sense of power is to pick on a life form weaker than oneself. The thought that got to me was of how many other human beings there were before and after this incident that had put a toe wrong in front of these two intolerant specimens. And what's more, how many other human beings were out there that were just like these two particular specimens.

Although the aim of the regime of the time was to separate whites from blacks, the presence of a few black homeless people, particularly this one, in white residential areas was a great marketing tool for creating a negative perception of blacks amongst whites. What this black hobo did was win votes for the white parties. Not that it really mattered though, because only white political parties were allowed to run for election anyway. Not that he really cared at this point either. The more whites, the more people to beg from.

He suddenly stopped his muffled gargles and for an instant I observed a moment of drunken clarity sweep across his face. His watery eyes then double focused onto something. It must have been the metal post with a no parking sign attached to it standing about two meters from him. I know this because he made a desperate James Bond type lunge towards this sign post. Had he not done that, he would have timbered down onto his face. He clung to the post like a tatty old flag trying to flap

around in the wind but not catching much wind. Then it happened. He started mumbling again quietly to himself as he opened the cane spirits discreetly. Discreetly, as if nobody suspected that he was even around, ever. What I witnessed thereafter resulted in my doing some very silly things at many different parties in the years to follow.

He brought the full bottle of sugar cane spirits to his chapped lips. He spilt a few large mouthfuls in doing so, but he soon regained his composure. His lips fastened tightly around the thread of the bottle like a weight lifter gripping the barbell moments before an attempt at the gold. He then dramatically threw his head back like a gymnast — the bottle of spirits turning upside down and glistening in the air like a trophy. His lips not losing a drop. The crystal-clear booze bubbled hastily as the surface level dropped and emptied down his throat and into his petrol tank. He did not flinch or pull any funny faces and neither did he explode. I was momentarily led to believe that perhaps it was mineral water or something. However, the way he passed out while he was still standing soon confirmed my suspicions that he was in fact horribly drunk and that it was most definitely cane spirits in that bottle. His knees buckled beneath him as they unlocked like when you were at school and somebody came from behind you and unlocked your one leaning and locked knee by simply tapping it. Both of his knees, in this particular case, unlocked simultaneously. As if he had instantly vanished, his garments fell to the ground. They left a dusty cloud at the level where they once were — in a most cartoonlike fashion — but now they lay wrapped around a no parking signpost covering a very ill life form.

I thought he'd died of a heart attack or something like that — alcohol poisoning at the least. The other black drunks hanging around the bottle store laughed even harder. He lay motionless. Whites walked past as if he really were only the rags around the signpost, although some glanced, some looked, and some stared. Nobody helped. Just then my mother arrived back at the car and shat me out from a dizzy height, because some traffic cop had written out a fine for “parking in a no parking zone” and placed it on our wind screen.

That was back in 1988. Since then, that Saturday morning has stuck vividly in my mind. It may as well be a photograph standing on my bedside table. I honestly believed that I would never see this man again because as far as I was concerned, he had died before my very eyes. That's what I told my friends and I even believed it. My life carried on and I finished school in 1990. I was eighteen years old and was going to be an artist because that's what I thought I wanted to do. I went to WITS Technikon to do graphic design so that I could be qualified at something in case I didn't become an artist. It was during this time that I discovered that I had an extraordinary ability. I was able to drink twice as much alcohol as the rest of my peers and wake up the morning after feeling twice as good. At many parties I would do my Jim Morrison impression for my mates and down about half a bottle of vodka, or whatever liquor was available at that moment. My hair was long and thick and curly, just like the dead singer's. However, when I closed my eyes and opened my throat to drink, I did not think of Jim Morrison. I really thought of the hobo who died before my very eyes on the Main Road of Melville after he had polished off a bottle of cane spirits.

What happened after impressions such as these is known to me only through the eyes of those who were present at the time — if they were still willing to speak to me.

This behaviour carried on for a few years.

Waitering

In 1994 I began waitering at a restaurant called the Roma Pizzeria in Melville. It was situated one shop off the corner of Fourth Avenue (a main road) and Main Road. I had previously attempted waitering back in 1991 at the Spur, but they were cruel slave drivers and, in all honesty, I didn't know what I was supposed to do for all the impatient customers. In 1994 I thought it about time to give waitering another bash. Roma Pizzeria was the place. It was owned by two Italians and business was good. So good, in fact, that on the wall in the reception area they had stuck up a notice saying, "Unfortunately, due to good business we are unable to partake in this year's economic recession."

Just around the corner from the Roma, on Melville Main Road, was Roxy's Rhythm Bar. After work in the evenings at about ten or eleven o'clock, some of the nightlife-loving staff and myself would hit Roxy's for after-work drinking sessions.

What we also used to do was go around the corner from Roxy's one street down from the Roma (Fifth Avenue, to be precise) to perform a ritual. Around this corner was a house. It was only inhabited by humans during the day for business purposes. What sort of business they were running I couldn't say. It had a well-kept front lawn, which conveniently enough was *not* fenced off so that citizens like us could walk all over it at night and leave a welcoming committee of empty beer bottles on the doorstep for the first person arriving at work the following morning. Next to the wall dividing the property of this house from the property of the house next door, in a corner, was a little tree. The lowest branches of this small form of vegetation were at about head height and the leaves would thus cover one down to the shoulders. This made for a nice little corner for illegal gatherings of people such as myself and my accomplices. We would stand there with our heads in the leaves and pass around what people of the law call *dagga* — weed, marijuana, pot, etc.

I was always anti-weed because of the way I had been brainwashed by the powers that be. But once I tried it I thought to myself, *This isn't bad*. I realized that they were talking crap and should consider legalizing marijuana and perhaps look into banning more harmful substances such as Prozac, McDonald's, and Coca-Cola. And assuming that Satan himself does exist, he hides his head in shame because someone else discovered alcohol and invented cigarettes, which are both highly addictive and detrimental to your health, but legal nevertheless.

We would stand under the tree and get stoned and then go back inside Roxy's for more booze. These evenings became routine. Go to work, go to Roxy's, go outside around the corner for a fat joint and then back inside for yet more liquor. Night after night.

The Handover

Early in 1994 the handover of the country took place. Crime was at the beginning of a very lucrative boom and the Rand was starting a sharp downward plummet, although that would be an understatement. However, I do think that the rest of the world (particularly the U.S. of bloody A. and the U.K.) deciding that the Rand is worthless simply shows how racist the rest of the world actually is towards Africa. Note how it happened as the blacks in South Africa took over power from the whites. One could say that it is economic sense but the fact that the Rand started

dropping as soon as the handover occurred is just too obvious. I would have thought that the Rand would be weaker before the handover because of all the economic sanctions imposed by the countries that were opposed to apartheid and therefore not investing. As soon as the handover happened, though, all the Europeans and Americans got cold feet and pulled out, didn't they?

Let us bear in mind that Europe, Australia, and the Americas are all a result of the spread of whites and Christianity and suffer from an undercurrent belief in Calvinism. The truth being that they are just as racist, if not more so, and one just has to pop on over there to see how racist they actually are. And if they can't even handle different race groups over there in their own land, why would they trust Africans with their money here? The result being that they hog all the power and money and live like gods, while 85 percent of the world's population lives in poverty. Calvinism led to capitalism and that is what steam-rolled the earth. Europeans did not earn and generate the power, which they now have over and throughout the world. They maimed and killed and encroached on other people's space. Their power and money is blood power and blood money. However, this is a major digression from the point. After the handover of South Africa in 1994, the Rand plummeted and crime escalated.

The seeds of the present car-watch system, which can be found throughout South Africa, had been planted. All the homeless people would hang about at empty parking bays and make out that they were helping citizens park their cars as the vehicles were being manoeuvred into a space. As one got out of the car one would be reassured by the gentleman that one's car was going to be well looked after. Some of these "car watchers" were cool, just getting by and earning bread. Others would be drunk, stoned, and high on anything from glue to high-powered industrial kitchen cleaner.

He fell into this category. The one night I got stoned with my friends, as we were strolling back from our little tree around the corner, this dude asked us for some money, then pushed for a cigarette, and then finally tried his luck and asked us for our beer. On receiving no beer he asked for some of our dagga. A strangely familiar voice was gurgling requests at us. It conjured up that Saturday morning incident six years ago as if it were right there and then. It was unmistakable. It was him. And he was very much alive — not healthy, but alive.

Amos

"Fuck off, Amos," said one of my mates to him. I guessed that his name was Amos and was in fact correct, judging by his reaction. Amos managed to respond, as drunk as he was, to the command blurted out by my friend. He did so with a sheepish laugh-type growl and half turned away like a shy monster. For some unknown reason I felt that I owed him for the spectacle he had created in Melville six years ago. I was also happy and truly amazed to see him alive. I gave him ten bucks, a cigarette, and the remaining half of my beer. Never again, from that evening on, was I able to walk past Amos without being harassed to give him some vice or another. At that stage in my life, I refused to give him anything after that evening. It was nothing personal. It's just that at that time I did not believe in giving money to beggars, because I believed that by giving them money it simply perpetuated the problem of homelessness. A problem that the government should solve, but because all the

guilty whites were giving money to the needy it eased the pressure on the government, and therefore the responsibility.

Then my attitude changed. I do not want to pay tax to our government because I don't agree with things like government officials using my money to buy their wives big black saloon cars and expensive hairdos from New York when they should have used it for the education, health, and housing of their own people. So inevitable tax aside, I pay my own tax using my own discretion. It's not much, but it works for my immediate surroundings and community and I see results. Or maybe I think I see results. True that I don't build any roads and that I don't contribute to the housing problem or the cleaning of our streets, but then again neither does our government.

Tax is not the issue though. Neither is the issue of whether it's right or wrong. The issue is Amos. Amos the beggar, Amos the drunk, and Amos the homeless. The symbol of all those that are a part of another society without laws, structures, and protection. It's each to his own and survival of the fittest. They are therefore, in fact, far closer to nature than any of the people who take their four by fours to the Drakensberg to go hiking on trails with guides, backpacks, and tents for four persons that only weigh one and a half kilos.

Every time we went around the corner from Roxy's Rhythm Bar to the tree to get goofed, Amos would be lurking about on the outskirts of our group, awaiting morsels of our vices like a lonely, hungry hyena. If we ever thought that we had finished a joint, Amos would always manage to find a few more hits. This was convenient for us because it felt like we weren't really giving him anything, but to him it felt like we were. A loophole for a clear conscience.

Because we knew him, we didn't ever give him much because, well, I can't actually explain it. Occasionally, when we were inebriated enough, we would include Amos in our twisted circle of communication and debauched laughter. At three in the morning, anything is entertainment if one has sufficiently poisoned oneself. At moments such as these we would give him some of our cigarettes, hits of our far from finished joints, and sips of our liquor. Putting the bottle back to one's own lips after Amos took a swig was something that most would not do. We never did that either, except for when we were drunk enough. In that state, who cared? None of us ever got sick from it. Nor diseased.

On nights like those we would also give him money. On nights like those, when everybody was being themselves and not concerning themselves with the fact that Amos was a smelly old bum, we also discovered that he too, strangely enough, was a human being. He even had a sense of humour. Then one evening Amos was really bugging us for cigarettes. We had given him a few, but he didn't hesitate to ask for more. He also insisted on having some of our *dube* (slang for dagga) before we had even finished it. Naturally, he also demanded some beer. Eventually, somebody from the group said, "Fuck, Amos, you're like a fucking mosquito," the statement clearly referring to Amos's parasitical qualities. Amos burst out laughing and started repeating, "A mosquito, Amosquito. Heh! Heh! Amosssssssquito." We also thought it funny and packed up laughing. This of course revved him up even more, like a child getting attention from a group of adults.

From that night onwards, whenever Amos saw us, he would yell *Amosssssssquito* (the volume increasing in proportion to his state of inebriation). You had to be there, I guess. We got sick of the joke very soon after. We had let down our guard and let

him too close to us and he was going to take full advantage. More cigarettes, more weed, and inevitably more drink. Amos, the “quito.”

When one looks back in retrospect I believe that Amos deserves a lot of respect. Amos did what most people on this planet would never do and even if they tried, they still would not get it right. He used to be a part of the South African Police during the apartheid era. He was officially aiding the whites in the suppression of his own people. He was witness to their torture and a spy for the enemy. It was a job that paid more than gardening, mining, garbage collection, selling ice cream to little white brats with a ridiculous bell on a bike, or digging holes in the road. Nevertheless, he was a traitor and well aware of this. He quit the police and assumed the occupation of tramp. Had he gone back to his own people, he would have been *necklaced* (a process where a mob shoves a tire around one’s neck, dowses one in petrol, and sets one alight) — the sort of thing one could see during the eighties on the eight o’clock news while the whole family sat around the television eating supper. Not exactly the sort of viewing that would convince whites of the time to hand over the country to the blacks just then. I doubt that Amos liked the idea of being necklaced either. So from 1982 onwards he bummed around in Melville instead. It was his turf before it would become swamped with others of his kind in the years to come. But in the meantime he was to be recognized as the Head Hobo of Melville by the few other bums who were living off the fruits of this uncompetitive and liberal suburb.

The Austrian Tennis Club

There was (and still is) this little park in Melville, which used to be known as the Austrian Tennis Club. It had three tennis courts, which were in immaculate condition. This park also had an Austrian Tennis Club clubhouse, which filled up in the late afternoons with Austrian families and their eager members, who waited enthusiastically for their turns to play against each other. On Saturdays too, but the whole day long. Elsewhere in the park stood a jungle gym, a merry-go-round, a see-saw, and a slide. Of course there were swings too, as well as this strange contraption, which was essentially a plank that swung long ways back and forth, but managed to somehow stay level at all times. Four of us could fit on that *thing*. A few meters away from the play-park area was a swimming pool shallow enough for little children to splash around in without drowning, although the pool was deep enough to swim under water. Built over the pool was a wooden structure with all sorts of creepers growing all over it. The park lawn was pretty and green, and the flowers blooming in the meticulously kept flowerbeds were very nice. All in all, it was an extremely fancy park. It always reminded me of the peak of the Roman Empire. Everything was utopian and classic, like in the adventures of Asterix and Obelix when the two heroes visit Rome.

The park’s immaculate facilities were maintained and looked after by a very traditional Portuguese man with one arm. He was like the Portuguese version of the Amish. He rode a red postman-style bicycle wherever he went. Because he only had one arm he didn’t have the strength to stand up on his pedals while riding, so he pushed his bike up most hills for many, many years. He used to freak out because his wife would walk from Westdene to our primary school in Melville to pick up her daughter — a good five kilometers — and then they would be given a lift home by

the mothers of the other kids. To this park caretaker, cars were evil and therefore not allowed. Naturally, his wife was supposed to follow suit, but chose not to. He freaked. An orthodox Portuguese if ever one did exist.

However, with his traditional approach to life came simplicity, pride, and self-respect. This was reflected in his work at the park. The Austrians were well satisfied with this because of that typical Germanic obsession with cleanliness and being as meticulous as possible. The park and Austrian Tennis Club was thus a place where Austrians could be Austrians in South Africa. A place where the Austrian community could meet and get homesick. This idealistic dream lasted throughout my childhood and up to 1994. This time period was also Amos's heyday, so to speak — his long and peaceful reign over Melville.

But the Roman Empire collapsed, did it not?

1994–1995

The park started degenerating in 1994 as soon as the country was handed over. The Nigerians, with other illegal drug pushers, were suddenly allowed to filter into our land along with the more desperate and cheap labourers from the troubled countries, such as Mozambique, surrounding South Africa. Amos's life therefore took a turn for the worse. The increase of people like him entering Melville made the competition intense and threatened his stranglehold on his turf. The competition was also more violent and disrespectful. Amos dealt with this by increasing his daily levels of consumption of substances with narcotic effects. This started in 1995. From 1994 to 1995, a year after the historical elections, the lives of Amos, the Austrians, the orthodox Portuguese, and every other South African had changed dramatically. South Africa had suddenly become a free-flow transit zone for what people, particularly whites, all over the world recognize as the deepest, darkest Africa. For the South African whites, all those happy, smiling days in the protective bubble of apartheid were splattered all over the show when that bubble burst. Reality struck as whites realized that South Africa was, in fact, shock horror, attached to the southernmost tip of Africa.

What happened because of all the people from the rest of Africa and in fact the rest of the world moving into Gauteng (the powerhouse of Africa) was that more cash was floating around. Lots of it was generated by the rapidly growing black and gray markets, but it was cash flow nevertheless. Because of this, Melville boomed with restaurants and other shops. More people with money, more restaurants, more clientele, more cars to park, more people like Amos trying to park cars for tips.

The Austrians from the Austrian Tennis Club ran away with their tails between their legs, and I do not know what happened to the one-armed orthodox Portuguese man although he had obviously lost his job. In the park the flowers died, the tennis courts cracked and sprouted weeds, the playground rusted to a halt, and the pool became a toilet before the water could even evaporate, allowing the surface to flake like a dry river bed. At nights the park had become home to people from all over Africa. The swings were used as firewood and the park transformed into a place where the drunk homeless people could sleep and congregate around a fire while they dealt with life. Amos started getting drunk earlier and earlier and began drinking with more intensity.

By the beginning of 1995, I had found a waitering job at a new bistro which had opened in Main Road further up from Roxy's Rhythm Bar. It was a twenty-four-

hour spot called Catz Pajamas. The building was an open-plan restaurant with four levels, each divided by about three or four steps built to size as stipulated in the builders' law book as to how normal steps should ideally be. Each level was like a separate room. There were two entrances, one at the top level and one at the lowest one. The Catz Pajamas bistro was buzzing around the clock.

From about four in the morning to about eight in the morning, creatures would be there, sitting, standing, mincing, laughing, shouting, drinking, smoking, and much, much more. At around eight o'clock the fresh and perky breakfast crowd would start filtering in, while the debauched slobber from the night before would be scraped up and shoveled to the lower room of the building.

The two middle rooms/levels would be left vacant. The more civil, daytime citizens of society would occupy the upper level. Sometimes, especially on weekends, the clientele of the night and the clientele of the day would be so great in numbers that they would break through the borders of their designated areas and cross over to no man's land: the two middle levels. These rooms were dangerous because the day and night clientele risked the grave chance of making contact with one another. It was interesting when that happened.

The breakfasters were the more inconvenienced citizens though. The type of effect one can observe when a well-groomed Sandton *kugel* — a rich, well-groomed, generally Jewish housewife — steps into a fresh, steamy dog turd neatly coiled up on the pavement. And does the Great Dane even care?

Many types frequenting Catz Pajamas during the twilight hours would be rushing on cocaine, which would nullify the hundreds of Rands' worth of liquor that they had already consumed — to a point. Part and parcel thereof were the ego trips and *fuck-you* attitudes of these people. In Gauteng, do not give a gun to somebody wired out of their pip on cocaine, particularly if they are tanked up with alcohol too. Or if this somebody already has a gun, avoid them.

Amosquito's Life

Then one night a couple of mates and myself walked the hundred and fifty meters from Roxy's to Catz. At the top entrance to Catz we noticed a commotion. There was a huge group of people standing around outside, which was often the case because the place was too full inside. The factor that classified this group of people as being a commotion was the ambulance parked facing the wrong way up the road with its red lights flashing brightly in the night. As we neared the gathering, a few people were seen crying. Not because they knew the shot victim, but because of shock. Amos was lying on the pavement convulsing in a pool of his own blood. He had been shot point-blank in the throat. He had apparently overharassed a cokehead by trying too hard to help the guy park his vehicle.

The cokehead got so worked up about this because he knew damn well that he had parallel parked his car all on his own and thus believed that he owed Amos nothing. There are those who can parallel park and those who can't. Those who can take great pride in this skill and don't appreciate anybody else taking credit for their masterful maneuvers. Especially when they're coked up. Those who can't parallel park can't do it when the likes of Amos "help" them anyway, which kind of proves that the so-called car park attendants were not doing a good job of helping people park their cars. Amos, being completely out of it at four in the morning, probably

did nothing but get in the way and would have stood more chance of getting money out of this specific man had he sat against the wall holding out a cut open tin, shaking small change. There were many like him hanging around at Catz, seeing as it was just about the only place open at that time of night. They were all begging indirectly by pretending to help somebody into a parking space and then asking for payment for their services. The comments coming from the drivers getting out of their parked cars were usually along the lines of “Fuck off! I can park the car myself. I do have a license.”

The ones with better manners would use the words “Get lost!” as opposed to “Fuck off.” (I do need to say that now, in 2002, the attitude is a lot more tolerant just in case someone feels defensive about the fact that they are *trying* to be patient.) Why should we pay for something that you didn’t really do or that we didn’t ask for? was the point of the driver. At least I’m not doing crime was the view of the beggar. Unfortunately, the standoff between Amos and the trigger-happy cokehead resulted in Amos going down in that round.

Apparently the person who had shot Amos undid his parallel parking and sped off hurriedly as soon as he had shot Amos in the throat. No witnesses were reported and therefore no suspects, which is completely understandable because the whole thing happened right outside Catz in full view of the full bistro’s clientele who could no doubt *not* see a thing through the huge windows between themselves and the incident. The loud crack of the gun most probably wasn’t heard either, because the thin glass must have been too thick for such loud sounds to pass through for the people’s selective hearing. The man putting his gun away and speeding off in his very inconspicuous luminous metallic purple Ford *Whatever*, which roared like a V378, 8.2 litre, wasn’t noticed either.

However, just about everybody seemed to notice Amos on the pavement, too badly hurt to even clutch his throat.

Our take-away pizza was ready before the first of the police arrived. Amos was taken to hospital by the ambulance about twenty minutes before one could smell the bacon and see its flashy blue lights.

Amos, the *quito*, was back on the streets of Melville about nine months later. The bullet had gone straight through his neck, making two neat holes — one at the point of entry and one at the point of departure. We were surprised and relieved to see that he was not only alive, but very well, too. Hospital food is probably as healthy as prison food, yet a lot healthier than rummaging through garbage for unfinished morsels left by people with houses and people who take food for granted. Amos also had nothing to drink (no alcohol) in hospital, not to mention a couple of other vices, which he was forced to kick. His face looked plump and healthy. His skin smooth and clean with a shiny radiance to it. To Amos, being in hospital was like being in a five-star hotel, a health spa, and rehab all at the same time. When it was his time to check out he more than likely had much difficulty deciding whether he wanted to stay for the five-star service or if he wanted to return to Melville and its vices.

We welcomed Amos back and gave him a cigarette and bought him a beer (and gave him a hit under the tree).

It was the end of 1995. I left Catz to move to the other side of Melville to work in a more established bistro called the Question Mark Bistro. There I ended up working for four and a half years, waiting for two and managing for another two and a half. For most of this stint I still did the Roxy’s and Catz Pajamas thing. A

routine that was firmly ingrained in my mind by that stage. Otherwise, 1996 was pretty uneventful. From my perspective, Amos's life through 1996 was also pretty uneventful. Things for him were back to normal, hanging about hoping for money, sips, and drags to be donated to him by the extremely kind, caring public of Gauteng. The novelty of having survived being shot in the throat had worn off. We were back to disrespecting him as much as before, maybe even more so.

One might not think or believe it, but beggars are humans too and disrespect towards them thus bounces off them like a harpoon wouldn't off the back of a whale. Progression in a beggar's life is a negative curve, a downward spiral, a plummet, a catch-22 all at once. They are at the front lines in the war of social decay. The direct results of modern society and the rat race. One would assume that homeless beggars get used to being battered by society and having it vent its frustrations on the weak. People are so busy trying to achieve that they can't even spend energy on their own marriages and families, never mind the likes of Amos.

Then came 1997 and we had a great celebration to welcome it on old year's eve of 1996. All the wheels, including the spare, fell off. Amos did not have too much of a celebration. Well, he did, but it ended before 1997 could take the baton from 1996. I had said that 1996 was pretty uneventful. In the dying moments of the year's reign it was as if 1996 made one last-ditch attempt to be noticed before it was to take a back seat in history. Amos got very fucked that eve and landed up getting another free holiday and rehab package at one of those five-star places he liked so much. Women dressed in white bathing one daily, free breakfast, lunch, and supper as well as television around the clock. This happened a short while before many nurses countrywide decided to strike to achieve a raise, which is quite understandable. They received their raises and of course some patients had to die and those that didn't had to sleep with dirty linen — some with very dirty linen. A while later, the teachers in the education department would also strike to the detriment of the children. How Amos was affected by this I do not know. How he landed up in hospital, I do.

New Year's Eve

He staggered into the car park opposite Roxy's, across the main road. Two particular cars parked alongside one another were rocking away rhythmically in the darkness. The final misting up of the windows before another year came along. In each car was a couple. Two male friends had managed to pick up two females who were also friends and who allowed themselves to be picked up by these two males. The grunts, yelps, and groans penetrated through the outermost shells of the vehicles and dissipated into the summer air well within earshot of many gatherings of citizens within the vicinity. The boys were happy and felt like men because they were getting laid. To a nineteen-year-old boy, not much beats the euphoria from getting laid. The girls were feeling happy because they felt wanted, though they knew very well that once the boys ejaculated all over their new clothes, bought that same day, and all over their parents' cars, that they would virtually fail to exist in the eyes of the boys. This is the sort of sex that was taking place. Nobody was there to make love. One could even see that in the way the cars rocked. Even if they were there to make love though, nobody was going to get it. Nobody was even going to have an orgasm — not even any of the boys who were at the age and were the type to generally climax

before penetration. A bit of liquor in their systems was helping to prolong things, but for once, premature ejaculation would have at least resulted in somebody climaxing.

Nobody was close to getting their rocks off that new year's eve as Amos, oblivious to the world and his own existence, stumbled between the two cars, which lunged back and forth like two red 1978 Ford Cortinas challenging each other to a dice. (A dice is two car owners deciding that they are going to be boneheads and race each other through the streets. They usually start off by revving their engines profusely and lurching their noses forward at a set of red traffic lights in Triomf.) Amos had no idea that anybody was even in there. He didn't notice the turbulence either as he leant against the one car to try and stabilize himself. Suddenly, as if possessed, Amos turned on the car that he was leaning on and started banging on the roof with great force as he shouted deliriously at the top of his gargling voice, "Happy new year! Happy new year!" BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! . . . THUNK! "Happy new year!" THUNK! THUNK! THUNK! . . . "Happy new year!" he carried on, shouting and banging in elation. It was only ten o'clock in the evening.

The two couples got a big fright. The girls screamed and tightened around the boys, who went limp in panic. The two cars stopped their vigorous rocking as they suddenly seemed to enter much calmer waters although there was still much confusion and fear on deck as the thunder continued relentlessly — BANG! BANG! BANG! . . . *Happy new year, HA!HA . . . Happy new year!*

The boys eventually managed to get out of the vehicles, still shirtless and doing up their trousers. Amos carried on laughing and screaming and thumping away, all with the best of intentions.

The boys did not see it that way and beat Amos to the ground with a couple of very audible blows to his head. They then kicked him while he was down till he was unconscious, because while he was going down he still carried on gargling *happy new year*, which to an idiot — which is what these boys were — would be considered extremely cheeky. After he was clearly unconscious, they carried on some more. The girls even joined in. Some of the people who had been standing around in gatherings and appreciating the primal screams and yelps of sexual pleasure suddenly had to jump in to protect Amos. In fact, those two couples who beat Amos also got beaten quite badly that night because the citizens that got involved were Roxy's regulars and therefore knew Amos.

These regulars were clad in black leather jeans and jackets and wore black T-shirts sporting deathly, detailed illustrations with names of murderous bands. They were regulars. They knew Amos, but, nevertheless, didn't like him. In fact some of them were previously responsible for giving Amos a couple of swats too because he was pestering them. But that night they were on his side, whether they really cared for him or whether it was simply an excuse to beat somebody up. I was satisfied to see the two couples holding their noses and ribs in agony. Even the girls. This was not a case of woman beating. This was a case of if you want to do that to somebody and kick them while they are defenseless, then you should expect the same treatment whether you are male or female. Regardless, these females were at least still conscious to feel their pain; Amos was not. The manageress of Roxy's, who also did not really like Amos but did not hate him either, called an ambulance. Amos was stabilized by the paramedics and then lifted into the ambulance, which whizzed off

flashing and wailing, in a manner that said, *Out of my way everybody, someone is dying.*

Amos Carries On

However, by now one would know that Amos was not going to die. This was a mere case of being punched and kicked around. If one wanted to kill Amos one would have to shoot him — properly. Amos was invincible. Shit, he didn't even spend one and a half months in the hospital this time round. He returned to Melville with a few bandages and scabby marks on his head. And he was back in time to pick the fruits of the citizens for the last few warm months of summer and the beginnings of autumn. In winter, as with trees, society provides very little to those foraging for paper fruit in the form of money.

Amos, by that stage, had raised enough eyebrows in the local community to raise some concern regarding his well-being. A few people who knew Amos pitied him. They organized a job for him at *The Black Steer*, a junk food take-away joint just up the Main Road from Roxy's. He was the "chipper." He made the chips, or the french fries as some people who want to create a different air about themselves say. Americans also use that french fries terminology but nobody cares. Knowing that Amos was making the chips, we never ordered any. We had shaken the ever greasy, gummy, and hardened hand of Amos before, and whether he knew that he had to keep his hands clean for the job or not was not a chance that we were willing to take. Anyway, he was not fired. He left on his own accord a week and a half later. He probably couldn't cope with the discipline, structure, and constraints of the consumer world.

If an animal is kept in the zoo for too long, or a bird in a cage, they will die if set free or released into the wild. Humans suffer from the zoo effect too. If they are locked in prison for too long, they don't have a realistic chance of blending back into society once released. True, Amos was not imprisoned or caged so to speak. He came from the opposite direction. He was free and wild in the concrete jungle, exposed to parasites and competing with rats for human waste in an altogether different race. To capture an animal in the wild against its will and then to tame it is not easy. Amos preferred freedom from the constraints of society and so once again we had to get used to Amos lurking on the outskirts of our smoky vibrations around the corner of Roxy's under the tree. *Retired* was the word that Amos now used to define his condition of unemployment. By then we had given in enough to respect him, but only a little bit. One had to admire his resilience.

By the end of March, Amos had healed completely. A few extra scars had been added. One eye was visibly damaged and he had a permanent snarl, which was unintentional. One could never quite decide if it was because of some connection in his head that was not working properly, or if it was a physically built-in snarl. His skull only grew sparse tufts of hair. Some internal screws had been knocked loose and he had developed various limps and hobbles, all of which told a large collection of unbelievable stories. By now Amos's physical appearance was highly animated. It was almost as if nothing more could happen to him. And if anything more did have to happen to him, one would seriously have to wonder on Amos's behalf as to whether there really is a God or not.

Winter 1997 came along like clockwork. It was a Friday afternoon late in the month of July. A few mates and myself were not working that day or night. It must

have been about four-thirty P.M. and we were sitting on the Roxy's terrace overlooking Melville Main Road. There was a view of the Melville Koppies — small rocky ridges of the land — which rested calmly in the background nearby. The mood was chilled and some drinks of an alcoholic nature were being consumed. Melville Main Road has two lanes for each direction of traffic. Up and down. Adjacent to the Main Road are parking bays, which allow for cars to park directly in front of Roxy's main entrance. Cars would be parked there all day alongside each other at about forty-five degrees, as the white lines indicated, to the Main Road. At four-thirty on a Friday afternoon it would be peak hour traffic. Bumper to bumper. Nowadays, peak hour happens later because people have to work harder to get by. Nevertheless, in the winter of '97, on that particular Friday afternoon, peak hour was happening at four-thirty. Everybody was getting geared for the weekend. We were.

Another Episode

Amos was lurking about the cars parked in front of Roxy's, helping them to park and to leave. When trying to reverse one's vehicle from those particular bays into the traffic flow of the Main Road, visibility for the driver is extremely bad. The fact that cars come screaming up into Melville from the bottom of the Main Road doesn't afford the reversing driver much chance of survival, if they were to reverse into the high speed flow of impatience. Somehow, Amos had cottoned on to this and was actually helping the citizens to enter the traffic flow as opposed to being the usual nuisance to these people, who were people that generally don't pay one for being a nuisance. Amos did his job with pride and dignity, directing the drivers of the cars around like a traffic cop, but with results far less chaotic. This Friday though, Amos was already well on his way. He must have started drinking in the morning. His usual dignified enthusiasm and command of the traffic was lying in the road and being driven over by many irritated citizens. It had obviously been a rough week for the people working in Johannesburg. Generally, people like to drink after a rough week. Especially South Africans.

The perfect example of one such South African was attempting to leave Roxy's. He had spent the whole afternoon there, drinking at the bar with what we could safely assume to be his colleagues. One of the hours was Happy Hour. Buy one, get one free. Hence our presence. Those people that he was drinking with must have been his colleagues. Had they been his clients then one would have to say that they probably weren't for much longer after that. He was ordering bottles of cheap red wine at a rate, never mind the fact that they came at two at a time. He was probably a respectable businessman during the week — nice silk tie, fancy suit, and Italian shoes — but at that moment his integrity and honour lay alongside Amos's outside on the Main Road in all the traffic.

This businessman's hair was all messed up. He had one of those hairstyles where bald people grow the hair on the sides of their heads so that they can grease it up and then comb it over their bald spot as if nobody would ever notice their baldness. He had obviously gotten over being bald by then. Thin, blond, semigreased strands of hair hanged pathetically over his ears. His bald spot was sparsely covered by the odd strand of hair. The businessman's face was red and bloated and his eyes swam in their sockets like the compass ball found on the back of the handle grip of those

Rambo survival knives that many boys got to play with as children. The top button of his white shirt was undone and his tie loosened. One could tell that he had loosened his tie hastily because the knot had clearly been jerked into a dense cluster of silk and he would have to use his teeth to undo it. The left front of his shirt was untucked from his pants and on that particular untucked section was a thick gravy-like red wine stain. His lips, teeth, and gums were stained likewise.

He had left the jacket of his suit half draped over a chair and half draped over the floor tiles of Roxy's bar as he attempted to leave the establishment. The jacket had been like that for about an hour already, as if it were dissociating itself from its loud obnoxious and drunk master. The businessman ventured to the entrance and staggered lazily down the stairs. His jacket could be heard breathing a large sigh of relief. At the bottom of the stairs the businessman stopped in confusion as he was confronted by the many cars parked before him. Eventually, after much scrutiny, he picked out his car and meandered towards it. He clutched himself in the cold wind. When he reached his car he started fidgeting in all his pockets, presumably for his car keys. Then he had a quiet but visible panic before apparently gathering his senses and walking briskly back into the bar, picking up his jacket, which groaned loudly as he slipped it on, and walking briskly back to his car. The jacket sported a dusty, yet incredibly detailed and crisp shoe sole print on the area of fabric covering the man's butt.

The businessman got into the car and started it up with a couple of loud and unnecessary revs. He then shifted into reverse and turned around to gauge the traffic flow, which he couldn't, even had he been sober. Amos was there though, and as the businessman started easing out, Amos lifted his hand to the businessman in a Nazi-like fashion, which was clearly the hand signal to stop, because there was traffic coming. The businessman got all this and broke sharply so that the car rocked. He turned to face the front and revved the engine loudly as he released the clutch to lunge the car forward, back into the parking bay. Of course this didn't happen because he forgot to take the gear out of reverse and put it into first before executing this egotistical and manly manoeuvre.

The car shot into the traffic, which screeched to a halt with a massive crunch of metal — it sounded more like a loud bang.

The businessman's car had reversed straight into the front fender of a police car which had been careering up Main Road faster than most other vehicles, because the police seem to think that they can somehow drive any which way they want to. Perhaps they think that they can't have accidents or that they aren't mere mortals like the rest of us. The businessman's car was facing the traffic flow and the back of the vehicle was on the back seat. The engine of the police car was scrunched up in front of the wind screen, but the policemen were all right apparently because they wore their seat belts.

Amos had been knocked by the businessman's vehicle and was shot into the two lanes of traffic going down Main Road. Luckily there was no traffic where he landed and the rest all managed to stop. This didn't help Amos though. He lay motionlessly in the road. The police car must have missed Amos by milliseconds. The policemen didn't even know of Amos's existence until they were interrupted by a member of the public. They were too focused on venting anger and arresting the drunk businessman. Somebody had to approach them while they were cuffing the man who was in turn insisting with red stained lips that he was sober. They turned

and saw Amos lying there. Then they called the ambulance, which arrived quickly, I must say. Some paramedics spent about fifteen minutes checking Amos, who was said to be in critical condition. The policemen shoved the businessman roughly into the back of another police car and left the scene in a huff with their blue lights flashing everywhere and their sirens blaring aggressively. Anybody would have thought that they were transporting a psychotic murderer to the gallows. Then the ambulance left the scene with Amos inside. The sirens and the flashing lights of the ambulance told a story of truth, unlike the police's. That was on a Friday afternoon, late in the month of July 1997.

The corn cricket is a magnificent thing, known in New Zealand as a wheatah and in Johannesburg as the Parktown prawn. It is large and indestructible and has the rusted red armour-plating of a knight. It provides cats with nonstop entertainment and dies in an android-type fashion — just keeps on coming for you and coming and coming even if it has to drag itself by the teeth. One once crawled up the drain-pipe of our kitchen sink at home. Once it had reached the sink drain where one inserts the plug it simply hooked its legs around the holes of the metal work and stayed there, staring patiently through to our world from the other side of the drain. The dishes were washed three times a day with Sunlight Concentrate and hot water. After the first day the Parktown prawn was still there. We thus tried more desperate measures to get rid of this thing. We boiled the kettle and poured freshly boiled water over it several times a day. But every morning when one went to check the sink drain to see if it was gone, it was still very much there. Hanging on effortlessly. I would blow at it. It would wave back happily with its legs and feelers. I would fill the kettle for some tea for myself, and for a Turkish bath for the Parktown prawn. It reminded me of pouring boiling oil over the enemy that invades my castle. After a week it was gone. No body was ever found. I considered having my identity changed and the locks of our house replaced. In the same vein, if Amos had to try to commit suicide he would turn out to be very frustrated.

Nine months went by after the July '97 car incident before Amos returned. We knew that he would return. Once again he was in time to appreciate the end of summer. He looked exactly the same as before except for one addition, which completed him as a character. He had acquired himself a wooden crutch. He was clearly still hurt and thus got from A to B very slowly. But the crutch made for a great prop, and the citizens were giving him more than ever before. The long stretch in hospital also cleaned him up nicely and he looked rather healthy. This of course, was not to last. Soon he was back on the outskirts of our little illegal gathering, but by now he always got something from us, and it wasn't even an issue, although he was still a pest but we bit our tongues. Once again everything seemed to be back to normal except for the crutch that Amos now carried around with him wherever he went.

It turned out through one of his drunken confessions that he was using the crutch long after he no longer needed it. But he knew that on the streets his income would increase directly proportionally to the pity that he could squeeze out of every last guilty cell of society. Amos had developed that business sense, which is one of manipulation. A very popular technique practiced by businessmen throughout the world. Hey, who cares if it's good or bad, right?

The winters in Gauteng are rough and sometimes very severe. Johannesburg lies two thousand meters above sea level where in winter the air is crisp, thin, and so dry that it burns the nasal passages when inhaling through the nose. It does not rain in

winter in Gauteng. Temperatures at night regularly drop to below freezing, but with the wind-chill factor it feels quite a bit colder. The wind cuts through one's garments and slices through one's legs like a butcher's saw. During the day there is generally not a cloud in the sky — just this eye-squinting white glare. Judge Dread lifeless, dry, and dusty sunsets with thin oranges fading into empty blues drag one into the night. Household pipes burst from the cold as the water inside freezes and expands, and plumbers smile knowingly. At nighttime one hears police sirens, gunshots, and dogs howling from across town because sound travels better when the air is cold and is thus more dense. Perhaps some have noticed that radio reception in winter is also better and that cars perform better when the air is cold.

About one hundred and twenty kilometers southish of Johannesburg is the town of Sasolburg, which is also the fart of humanity. This town specializes in fuel and somehow produces an excessive amount of sulphur dioxide, more commonly recognized as the rotten egg smell. Because of the general wind direction in winter, Johannesburg lands up receiving all this sulphur dioxide. Not only that. The stuff settles over Johannesburg. It doesn't pass through and it doesn't blow over. Johannesburg experiences this thick lingering silent but violent odour of the industrial city, Sasolburg, and its flatulence. At night it gets worse, no doubt because the air is colder and thicker and thus more lethargic. Nights in Johannesburg are cold, unpleasant, and eerie. Amos, however, knew how to deal with the harsh elements of winter. Not to say that winter was his favourite season. Amos, like any other homeless person in the world, fought the elements with the elements. He may have been at the bottom of humanity's economic and social ladder, but he still had access to one of man's greatest discoveries — the ability to make fire. The winter of 1998 was as I have just described winters of Johannesburg to be, but more severe. It was a bitch. We even had to wear gloves and scarves to leave Roxy's to go and smoke giggle-stick, a joint of Mary Jane, under our tree. August had waited eagerly in line behind July for its turn to toy with humanity in South Africa. August in South Africa is like a young adult cat that loves to maim and shred weaker and smaller life forms. Particularly over Gauteng.

It was an evening in August in that bastard winter of 1998; just over a year since Amos had been hit by that businessman in his car. The wind was exceptionally harsh. The temperature was so low that, hypothetically speaking, if there were to be a cloudburst, the whole of Johannesburg would have been crushed by a mammoth ice block. We were at Roxy's and needed to smoke a joint, so a few of us more desperate ones bundled up and ventured out bravely to our tree. There on the corner was Amos, sitting contentedly with a huge grin on his face in front of a raging fire, which he had built. We stood next to him for a while. The wheels turned visibly in his head. It was his fire and he had made it all by himself. Eventually he made it quite clear to us that it would cost us a beer, cigarette, and a joint to share what he had created. We obliged, although we decided to smoke the weed further up the side road under our tree. This decision was made because the police seemed to be around, even though we couldn't see them. Pork has a very distinctive aroma and it's very difficult to digest. Amos chose not to join us that evening. He just stayed at his fire like a mother bird guarding her nest of freshly laid eggs. Occasionally though, he would dash up the side road past us to a car where people were leaving in the hope of receiving a tip for "watching" after their car.

We bitched and moaned about the cold as we swung the joint around. We watched Amos in his ripped takkies, no socks, torn pants, and thin pullover. No jacket. No

jersey. No scarf. We pitied him and discussed amongst ourselves that we should bring him some of our own old unused clothing. The light of the fire lit up his face, accentuating every scar, bump, and depression. The shadows were long and danced in time with the flames. Some people rounded the corner from Roxy's and headed past us up the side street. They looked at us, but we couldn't tell if their expressions said that they longed to join us for some of God's lawn or if they wanted to kill us for doing Satan's weed. Some people are not fussed by dagga, even if they do not necessarily smoke. Others actually do believe that it is bad even though they will gladly drink themselves into oblivion. Amos came scuffling up the road after them for his tip. Just then a small but extremely full bus — it must have been a twenty-seven seater — came chugging up Main Road. It stopped where the side road joined Main Road. The doors and windows burst open and about twenty-six young, massive, and very drunk rugby players gushed out with cries of desperation, as if somebody had dropped Sasolburg in the bus and the doors and windows couldn't open. They poured out of this bus. It turns out that they were all desperate for a pee. They all headed for the closest wall, except for one bloody fool who got a brain wave and began relieving himself on Amos's fire. The rest of the youngsters caught on and by the time Amos was coming back down the road, twenty-six arseholes were peeing on his fire. They all grunted and groaned with exaggerated relief — the second best feeling in the world. Amos stopped about ten meters from these urinating idiots. We watched with frustration. He just stood there quietly and watched. The last thing one wants to do is tell about twenty-six drunk rugby playing youths to stop doing what they are doing, basically because one values one's own life. Yet at the same time we wanted to sedate everyone of those boys and tie them over some bamboo shoots and leave them there for two weeks while the bamboo grew. Bamboo can grow a couple of centimeters every day, you see.

After what seemed to be a very long time for one pee, they packed up their fire hoses and pissed off, leaving lots of darkness, cold, and some smoke in place of what once was a huge, glowing source of heat. It felt like the sun had been switched off on a hot summer's day. We all watched in disbelief and silence, the Roxy's music thinking softly from the inner depths of the building while the remnants of the fire hissed like a threatened cobra. After a silent moment as if having a minute of silence to pay respect to the fire, Amos simply turned towards us, shaking his head slightly, and said: "Cigarette . . . please boss." We fumbled in our pockets with urgency, desperate to console him. Some of us wanted to give Amos money to buy firewood as a minor consolation. Others said that it was bullshit and that Amos would simply spend it on liquor. What they didn't understand was that Amos probably needed a very stiff drink anyway. We gave Amos twenty bucks and went back into Roxy's with an excuse to have a stiff drink ourselves. The whole incident had sobered us up completely. We were frustrated and angry. Tequila was the remedy.

Epilogue

We don't know what Amos did for the rest of that evening or how he spent the money that we had given him. In fact, nobody that knew him would see Amos for another two years except for the manageress of Roxy's, who saw him the next day. It was a surprisingly warm day that God managed to create. Not that Amos actually cared, because something else went down that day. He was sitting on the stairs of the

entrance to Roxy's, basking in the dull, warm winter rays of the sun, while the rest of us slept the day away and our bodies worked overtime trying to process bottles of tequila gold. Some man strolled past Amos and up the stairs into the bar area. It must have been around lunchtime. The man asked the manageress if a man called Amos was about and she showed him to Amos on the stairs. The man went up to him and invited Amos to join him for some tea or coffee on the terrace. Amos obliged. They both ordered tea. Amos finished his tea before the man found his own tea to be cooled enough to sip very carefully. The steam still bellowed from his cup. The man, it turns out, was a lawyer. He opened up his brief case, reached inside and hauled out a wad of money. *Thirteen thousand Rand* (South African) to be exact. The lawyer then explained to Amos that it was from a year ago when a drunk businessman ran Amos over with his car. So something had been done about that drunk fool. Somebody must have helped Amos put in a claim or something. Amos apparently did not look surprised. In fact he reached forward, took the stack of money without saying anything to the lawyer and got up from the table. He walked past the bar and the manageress, looked to her and waved the money in her face, and before disappearing out the front door for the last time, he said: "Aaaish medem. Me, I em going on de holiday." ❀

