

I don't want to blog essays. I had intended to provide a few, very brief, vignettes; literary snap shots of the most unusual moments from the week passed, but when the power went out last night (the generator died), I was forced to type on my I phone, in the dark. This story was all I could manage to write in the less than optimal surroundings. I'll have more soon.

A Night in Tembisa Township

One of many segregated townships Tembisa, known to South Africans as a "black township," lies on the outskirts of Johannesburg. It is a massive, sprawling area as large as Jo'burg but housing a population over twice the size. On Monday, June 14th, I stayed overnight.

Travelling along the main highway through Johannesburg, one sees many an exit, but, few look as neglected as that one which leads to Tembisa. A line of trees and thick bramble, growing roughly 10 feet behind the exit sign, make the township invisible to passersby; one might mistake the "off-ramp" for a dead end or a police car "hide out."

The exit should not be taken with car windows open for the amount of dirt and dust that ricochet off one's tires and become airborne will make it difficult to breathe. This was Zack's (my friend and hired driver) advice to me before we exited Jo'burg and entered the township of his youth.¹

Tembisa is a place which few tourists will ever see. Infact, it is a place which many S.A residents will never see, particularly those with white, coloured (sub-Saharan decent), or brown (Asian & Indian) skin tones. For those races to enter this township, without a native black, would be "extremely ill advised," Zack told me.

Zack slowly maneuvered his rusting, silver, '93 Cadillac around the treacherously tight curves of the Tembisa exit, which wound around the thick brush. As the tree cover thinned a long, empty road stretching into the horizon, became visible; a seemingly endless road, delicately arching left to outline the steep slopes that rise above the massive basin in which Tembisa lies.

An area established for blacks by the South African Government during apartheid, Tembisa's housing projects are reminiscent of the poverty stricken ghetto's in India; thousands of nearly identical, derelict tin and brick structures, painted in tattered hues of gray, stretching further than the eye can see.

Small roads, with European names, rolled off the steep edges of Tembisa's hillside. Zack turned on his left turn signal as we approached Charles Street, a very thin avenue crowded with cars and pedestrians.

¹ Zack, the caretaker at Ke Ke Guesthouse (where I am currently staying), was kind enough to introduce me to this part of South Africa, rarely seen by those who are not black, South Africans of Seshoto decent

As we slowly drove down Charles, I tried not to notice that all eyes were on me. Grade school girls and boys looked at me with considerable shock, teenagers glared and those in their advanced years seemed to look through me with weary, non-confrontation eyes.

Zack wanted me to meet his childhood friends, Peter and Andrew.

We pulled up to a stone house with a wooden roof. Zack explained that some people in Tembisa, like Peter, whose house we were visiting, refused to live in the government projects and chose instead, to build their own houses.

He drove the Cadillac into Peter's small brick driveway and pulled with all of his might on the stiff emergency brake. I opened my door and stepped out into the dry, winter's eve. It was 6:00 p.m.. Exhaling, I could see my breath in the air, a cloud illuminated by an ancient street lamp tilting in the concrete sidewalk to my left. The air smelled of many a braai (South African Barbeque) and it reminded me, for a moment, of a winter's night in NYC, where the air is equally dry and cold and the aroma of street vendor's barbeques drown out any other scent.

Peter's house, although he had helped build it, was home to several others as he could not afford to maintain the two story structure on his own. I followed Zack up a fire staircase to the second story of the house. At the top was a wooden door, behind which, I could hear the muffled voices of FIFA sports announcers. Zack grabbed the brass door knob and pulled.

Inside was a tiny room, barely 10 square feet, with a round bed, cabinets, a Tupperware washing basin, and, quite literally, a pot to piss in. Peter sat on the bed and Andrew on a milk crate, each holding a Castle Light (one of the South African Brewery's (S.A.B.) best selling beers). I greeted Zack's friends with a traditional S.A. handshake (a U.S handshake which morphs into an arm wrestle grip and finishes with a snap of one persons thumb against the other person's.)

"Dumelantate," I said. (That is hello in Sesotho, the tribe from which most blacks in Gauteng originated - - Sesotho refers to Sothern Sotho, that tribe from which Zack and his friends descended. One can find both Northern and Southern Sotho in Gauteng... the dialects differ only slightly.)

"Dumelantate," Peter and Andrew responded.

The three childhood friends (including Zack) could not have been more hospitable. Instantly, after just a handshake and a greeting we were friends. After six or seven Castle's, we were brothers; it's like the S.A.B. slogan goes: "everything comes together with a Castle."

I was offered a milk crate to sit on until the football match, between Denmark and the Netherlands, reached half time. By half time I had consumed my fair share of lager, but, in S.A., particularly in the townships, friends, beer and football are inseparable. When Andrew noticed that we were out of beer, he decided that we should visit "busy corner," an outdoor butchery/buy and braai where five beers cost only R40.00 (about \$4.50).

Zack could not join us for he needed to pick up a group of clients (my house mates) from a club in Mandela Square (I did not expect him to stay.) Before he left he whispered, "If anything goes wrong just call me and I will come and get you." (It was not a phrase meant to elicit fear or worry, it just came out that way).

Busy corner was empty when we arrived but within minutes, as the clock struck happy hour, the brick laid square filled with people.

Two large plasma screens hung at the bar, located on street side of the square. Opposite the bar, lay a display of meat in a cold case. Peter and Andrew asked me to choose the cuts so I asked the butcher for Boerowers (the thickest I could spot; they were long and fat like German Bratwurst), hanger steak and lamb. With our order came a side of pap (flour and corn meal, boiled in water with salt, until it becomes thick and dense, like an under cooked loaf of bread) and chacalaka (a pickled and spiced vegetable relish in which one dips the pap.)

With the raw meat piled atop a paper plate, we approached the grills at the center of the square. I tipped the braai operator the customary R5.00 and he laid our meat upon the open flame, cooking it to our specifications. The cooked meat was then piled back on the same plate from which the raw meat had come.

To properly prepare our meal, we walked to a large metal can near the bar, labeled braai spice (a mix of peri-peri chili powder, salt, black pepper, garlic and sugar), and dumped a healthy, sinus clearing, portion upon our meal. With a bucket of Castle Light and Savanna Dry Spiked Cider in hand, we sat at a picnic table to eat.

As I took a sip of Savanna dry, I noticed that many restaurant goers were staring at me. I think they were more curious than disturbed by presence for after I began to eat with my hands (I imagine some were waiting for the European looking guy to ask for utensils) and to laugh about football whilst talking to my new friends, as if I were in my element, the stares and glares nearly stopped. I didn't realize it at the time but as pointed out by Andrew, a group of girls at the table behind ours continued to stare.

"She wants you," Andrew said to me. He stared at me for a moment with a puzzled look on his face -- as if he expected some reaction which I was not exhibiting.

"Oh don't worry about it man," he continued. "We'll find you a much prettier girl."

We had been joking about women and sex for a good part the evening... nothing new... just the typical semi-drunken conversations that guys have.

"Ok, we'll do that," I said with a laugh. I looked behind me to see the girl to whom he was referring. She was chubby, with a mushroom contoured afro and a tooth missing.

"Asshole," I said to Andrew who was laughing himself to tears. We were just guys, joking around.

Zack had dropped me off at busy corner before he left, so Peter and I were to leave in Andrew's car. Peter requested the back seat so I sat in the front with Andrew. Throughout dinner, I had informally interviewed him for a piece I am currently investigating about the South African beer culture. Now that he had consumed enough alcohol to loosen his lips, I hoped that he might be willing to answer some of my, more, controversial questions. But I didn't want to ask him while he was driving; I would have been more reticent to drive with an intoxicated friend had I been completely sober myself. I knew, however, that most people after 7:00 p.m., in Tembisa are not sober behind the wheel--- driving through a township is a dangerous game regardless of the amount of alcohol one consumes -- your damned if you drink and damned if you don't.

As we entered the long road next to Tembisa, Andrew pulled three Black Label beers from beneath his seat and passed two of them to me and Peter. Peter used his key chain to open his beer while Andrew, skillfully popped his top on his steering wheel. I was stunned that he was going to openly drink and drive in area where police presence is heavy. Before I could think of anything to say, he snatched my beer from my hand and with same steering wheel maneuver, handed me back an open "frosty."

He began to accelerate. His speedometer read roughly 95 mph. From his steering wheel he operated the music volume, turning it up full blast.

I was not about to let him kill us all in a car accident, so, I reached over to his dashboard and turned the volume knob to low... nothing happened. I tried to raise my voice loud enough to get his attention but I could not. I tapped on his shoulder and he turned down the music for a moment. Before I could say anything, however, I realized that it was not me who prompted him to adjust the volume. We were being tailed by a white car. And then... flashing red blue lights brought us to a sudden stop causing me to spill lager all over my pants.

"Hide the beer," he said.

I quickly shoved my bottle below my seat.

The officer approached us and Andrew opened his door (opening the door is not an offence in South Africa when one is pulled over), and said good evening to the officer in Sotho. The officer asked, also in Sotho, if we had been drinking. Andrew replied, "no" and leaned back in his seat. As he did this, something beneath his seat made a clinking sound.

"What was that," the officer appeared to ask in Sotho. Reaching under Andrew's seat, he removed a half finished bottle of beer. A furiously rapid Sotho dialogue then began. I sat motionless. What sounded like an angry dialogue, to my surprise, began to soften and, just a minute or two later, the officer and Andrew were laughing together. The police officer and Andrew then began to speak in English.

"Alright so five hundred, yes," Andrew asked.

The officer shook his head in agreement as Andrew pulled a money clip from his pocket and removed R500.

"Thank you," the officer said as Andrew handed over the cash. "My kid's have to eat," the officer said looking over at me.

Then with a smile and a South African handshake, the officer got back in his car and drove away... But not before taking one of our unopened bottles of beer with him.

Andrew was annoyed that he had just thrown away 500 Rand. He left the radio off for the rest of the drive allowing me to ask him questions about the police and drunk stops-- a topic very relevant in my beer culture story.

My nerves were a little on edge so I finished the portion of my beer that was not on my pants (remember, I had spilled.) Andrew finished his also.

As we turned onto Charles Street, Andrew stopped the car and looked out of the back window with a smile on his face. Peter, who had been silent the majority of the evening, also smiled and said: "Max we have your woman."

"Excuse me," I replied not seeing anything or anyone through the back window. Andrew put his car in reverse.

Two girls stood on the street corner. Andrew rolled down his window and appeared to flirt with them in Sotho. They began to walk away. But Andrew persisted and continued to follow them down the road. Peter also began to flirt in Sotho. It looked as if the girls were going to run away, but then, one of them giggled at something Peter said. She approached the car and her friend followed. After a few more words and fold of bills were exchanged, Peter opened one of the car's backdoors and the girls got in.

A number of thoughts, then, crossed my mind, in no particular order: "oh shit, I didn't see this coming," "these girls look like they're twelve years old," "these girls are Tembisa prostitutes and South Africa has the highest HIV risk in the world," "Andrew and Peter said they were doing this for me and I saw Andrew give the girls a wad of cash, how do I get out of this situation without ticking off two of my most valuable sources for my beer story."

"I told you we would find you a chickadee," Andrew said. "This is my gift, your African woman."

I said nothing until we pulled up to Peter's house.

"Listen," I said to Andrew. "I really appreciate this. I mean, I'd love to get laid tonight, we should go to a club or something, but, I am more than a little concerned about disease here, with these girls."

Andrew got out of the car, put his hands on my shoulders and started walking me towards his front door saying: "don't worry these girls are good. No diseases."

I stood silent for a moment, contemplating the best course of action. I could see a bunch of teenage boys on their bicycles, resting in the driveway below Peter's fire escape. I had to go in the apartment. If I stood outside and called Zack, I would be asking the kids below to rob me.

So I went into the apartment and stalled. I reminded Peter that there was beer in his trunk (leftovers from busy corner) and that we should offer some to our guests. Peter agreed and went to get the beer. Andrew walked to his stereo and turned on a CD that men in South Africa listen to frequently²: Celine Dion's: Falling Into You. I smiled because, in South Africa, it is socially expectable for anyone to listen to anything. If a guy were to play Celine Dion in America for a room of girls he wished to seduce, he would be labeled a homosexual. I stood for a few minutes, amused, and still a little drunk. By the time Peter returned with the beer, the girls were sitting on his circular bed talking to Andrew. They immediately abandoned Andrew for Peter's beer allowing me to pull Andrew aside.

"We just picked these girls up off the street and I am really concerned about disease...about HIV, among other things," I said.

"What, you think HIV is a South African disease... you're too smart for that," Andrew said raising his voice. "All of that talk about more disease in South Africa is bullshit, man! You musn't believe that. Is there crime? Yes, I'll give you that. But disease, no. And I paid 200 Rand for this welcome gift!"

Andrew then realized that he was raising his voice and apologized. Opening one of Peter's drawers, he removed an industrial size roll of condoms --- literally, about ten feet worth... Next to the roll in the drawer sat an automatic weapon.

"You just have to put two on at the same time," Andrew said. "That's what I have always done and I just was tested last week... I'm clean. Plus, I will not be happy if I just wasted all of this money on you."

Peter must have overheard our conversation, as he, from the other side of the room, nodded in agreement and said, "Two at a time bru." (bru-- Afrikaans for bro/brother).

Clearly, dialogue and fact citing would not negate the fact that both men in the room truly believed that HIV is not a serious matter in South Africa. Furthermore, I didn't want to piss off a guy with an assault weapon in his dresser drawer, guy who I did not really know, in the middle of Tembisa Township, at midnight.

As there were only two girls, Peter began think ahead. He designated one for me and said that he and Andrew could take turns with the other. Things were getting heavy quickly and I could not leave the room so I moved on to plan B: unnerve the prostitutes. Make them want to leave without Andrew and Peter noticing. I knew it wouldn't be difficult given the age of the girls. I don't know how I knew this but one of the best ways to "turn off" a prostitute is to develop a relationship; get her to talk about her childhood, her dreams, her aspirations etc... To elicit an emotional response from a prostitute is to bring humanity into a business that often requires the sex worker to abandon typical human emotions.

² Other than Knann's "Wave Your Flag," no other artist has had more airtime, from Durban to Johannesburg, as Celine Dion. Go figure.

The girl with whom I spoke was Tracy. Tracy was 18 (or so she said) and still in highschool (that much was obvious--- she couldn't have been older than a 9th grade freshman.) I told her that I was studying to become a journalist and that I was in Africa to sharpen my skills as a travel writer. I told her of all of the countries I have visited and asked her if she had ever traveled. She confessed that she had never left Tembisa but always wanted to ride in a plane. I asked her to pick one place she would really like to visit. Paris, France was her answer.

"That's the city of romance you know," I said.

"Yeah, I used to..." and then she stopped speaking.

I tried to fill in the blank for her succeeded, I think.

"A lot of people dream about going there and finding "the one," love that is... And then they never go because, for some reason, they think it an impossible journey," I said.

She looked at me and nodded knowingly.

"Are you really in highschool?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

I glance over at Peter and Andrew they are both trying to engage the same girl.

"I mean, you're in Highschool," I stated. "You're young. You're beautiful. Why not put your energy into school and look for a job in Jo'burg? I've been talking to you and you are obviously intelligent. Anybody would hire you. And then when you finish school and advance in your career, Paris won't be a dream any more. It's not that expensive if you work for a while and search for a really great deal."

She remained silent for a few minutes. The girl with whom Andrew and Peter were spending time asked to be excused for a cigarette break.

As I had been talking to Tracy I had been moving closer to her. I knew that getting closer while having the conversation that we did, would be uncomfortable. Andrew saw us laying together and gave me thumbs up. I smiled and did the same. Tracy then asked if she could also smoke. Peter was beaming.

"When they are finished smoking it's Mh, Mh, Mh, Mh," Peter vocalized punching and open hand with every "Mh." we.

I agreed. Five minutes passed and I asked what was taking the girls so long.

"I don't have all night, man," I said.

Andrew shook my hand, S.A. style, in agreement. He walked to the door and opened it.

The girls were gone. He asked me to wait in the apartment while he and Peter checked downstairs. I agreed, and as they left the apartment I called Zach and asked him to show up. I asked him if he would not mention that I called and show up for another reason.

Peter and Andrew returned. I asked them to tell me what was happening and Peter said, "They were too young...and stupid. You can't trust girls that young."

"Dammit," I said.

Andrew apologized profusely.

And then, Zack showed up. With him were two of my Mexican housemates, Johnny and Jose. Jose and Johnny did not speak English, so, Zack spoke for them, saying that they want to go to a club. Andrew was not interested in going out, at 1a.m., to a club. Peter agreed with Andrew and decided that he was tired. I however, did want to go to the club.

Before I left with Zack, Andrew apologized once more and said that he would make it up to me. I told him not to worry.

Andrew has let go of his desire to treat me to a prostitute. The automatic weapon is for self-protection. After a week of getting to understand Zack and his friends better, I have come to trust that they are decent people. Thanks to Andrew, I may be able to get a glimpse of the seldom seen African Initiation Schools.