

# *Nature*

Myronn Hardy

**T**hey shot the boy in the back and the crowd fell. The man behind the boy picked him up and ran. A girl ran beside him as the boy bled through his mouth, his nose. He died a few hours later. I wasn't born in 1976, not even a thought. I stood in western Soweto where young gray faces had been painted on tall billboards. Police officers gathered with guns at their sides. All in khaki and ready for anybody to say anything, ready to use those guns, waiting to use them on any black body too aware, too unwelcoming, too unimpressed with their power. The smoke that billowed in the air came from burning garbage. Who's to say it wasn't human along with paper, plastic, wood, chicken feathers and bones? There was something fleshy in the scent, the color in the air. The ground was scorched, tan, rocky. The only things green were weeds that looked like spikes ready to wound.

I had been in Johannesburg too long. In two weeks I'd be back in Manhattan. My attempt at a journalism career and my research

project would be over. The research was really over three months ago as my advisor died after having a sudden stroke and I'd refused their replacement. He was an idiot plus I didn't know him. I kept on, each day going into Soweto and interviewing people about their lives during apartheid and after, as if any government or society so cruel could so drastically change overnight, in a month, a year, four years, out of respect for my advisor, who helped me reconfigure my life after I decided not to go directly to journalism school, the people I began to know, and the work itself. This was important. My routine of listening to Al Green in the morning as I got dressed, then heading outside to see (it wasn't my choice) a local pimp wearing a sweat-stained straw fedora who pointed an orange plastic gun (at least I thought it so) at me. "I'm going to kill you," he'd say.

"Do it. Please take this horrible life away." The first time I said this, I surprised myself. He frowned. Then after, he'd hold his stomach, run in place, and laugh, the gun dangling in his hand. At night, Abdullah Ibrahim on disc as I smashed tiny cockroaches, at least fifteen, sometimes twenty-five on the matted yellow carpet, shoe in hand. That charm permanently disrupted. I would be pleased but not necessarily relieved. This place would exist as it had, perhaps there would be some small changes but it would be here; me on the other side of the world complaining about something I shouldn't because I'd learned of another life, another veracity perpetually worse.

David said he'd be late but I didn't believe him, he never was, so I got to the bar early. It was about a two minute walk from the memorial site. At ten in the morning, there were seven men and four women in that small bar staring into their bottles and glasses. One woman with three empty beer bottles on her table breast-fed her child as she guzzled another beer. She looked like a hill that had been walked on too many times yet hadn't become smooth, but more trampled, uneven. There was a gap in the tin roof where the sun beamed so bright I thought it would melt the tattered linoleum floor, a square of light in the humid square of that bar. I sat on the hard birch stool, placing my arms on the cold aluminum counter. Everything inside looked broken including the glass covering the photographs of a nude Marilyn Monroe and an almost topless Pam

Grier. The bartender (with one white starburst eye and a total of four fingers, three on the right hand, one on the left) yelled, “We’ve got beer here. Nothing else.”

“That’s all I want,” I said, but didn’t really want anything. It was early in the morning and I hadn’t become an alcoholic—not then, not yet—but I understood how many were. Some of the women had left the township to work in the city, either in somebody’s house, market, or a side street to sell grilled corn, nuts, or candy. The bartender opened a beer in front of me. His red fez looked like a well-carved stone on his head.

He placed two brown hardboiled eggs on a chipped white saucer. “Eat these first,” he said.

I wasn’t hungry but curious. “I thought you didn’t have anything else.”

“I don’t, but you need to eat something before you drink. Your stomach is too young for beer this early.” I was stunned by his concern, his kindness. I hadn’t anticipated it. I never had anywhere. It probably came from his seeing with one eye, too many kids drinking themselves to death, sniffing glue just to become numb, to dissolve in ether, “Where are you from?”

“America.”

He smiled, “Really, I wouldn’t have guessed that, Cape Verde maybe ...”

“Outer space?” I interrupted and grinned.

“Yes. Yes, outer space is more what I imagined. You are a very funny young man.”

“That’s only today.”

“It should be every day my friend. Each day of your life you should laugh at least once. It will keep you from dying.”

“So that’s it. That’s how we survive?”

David pushed the door open breathing heavily. I could see his eyes through his blue tinted shades, his black knapsack tight on his shoulder. “Coleman,” he yelled, his arms stretched out.

“Patel,” I said, pounding his fists before we hugged.

“I told you I’d be late. I had to get here from the airport.” He sat at the bar and took off his sunglasses, “Rwanda again. Angola tomorrow.”

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I met David Patel at the Tamarind Café where I had lunch daily, either curried vegetables or chick peas with spinach and some kind of bread with seeds or potatoes. Every other restaurant I'd tried made me sick. And the food in general had been bad, overcooked, undercooked, salty or saltless, greasy, and overpriced. I also didn't have a kitchen in my rented room. He was writing an article on his laptop, notes in stacks on the small glass table and on the surrounding pale green ceramic tiled floor, the pens in various colors. The waiter, who was also the owner, kept refilling his mug with tea and occasionally asked if he was finished writing. His response, if there were words, was, "I'd like more Naan, please." And it would arrive along with the middle-aged waiter with white-wavy hair. He would laugh as David tore off a piece of the bread. He'd go on about hippies in Goa and Asians in Mozambique. David wasn't interested. Maybe he thought it was silly, nonsense he'd already processed and discarded. Perhaps there were some deep implications he didn't want to address. In any regard, the conversations were monologues, albeit, painful. Once he looked at me during a "conversation," shook his head and pressed his fingers to his temples, moving the skin in circles. He walked to me without stopping the owner, "I'm going to get a haircut. Do you want one too? It's on me."

I found this introduction, this peculiar request, shocking. I looked around me, for what I didn't know, and stood up. "I guess I need a haircut."

"But who really needs a haircut? We do it because...somebody said so."

"So you're telling me and I'm following you?"

"I'm not telling you anything. It's a crumb of a gift."

"A crumb?"

"Of cake. Of bread."

"Of South Africa?"

"Whatever."

"No, tell me."

"Nada."

“Now you speak Spanish?” I didn’t know if he was getting irritated so I stopped. It was too early for my wit, if one could call it such. I left money on the table and gathered my knapsack, “You can leave that here.”

“No, I’ll take it with me. It’s not that much.” I didn’t know who these people were, not that I had anything really valuable other than my tape recorder and notes. The owner was no longer laughing. He seemed stunned, almost offended.

“We’ll be back, my friend,” David said. “Will you watch my things?” The owner laughed again and shook his head. As we left the restaurant, I noticed its shape like that of a large wedge of cheese. On our short walk through Yeoville, I learned that David grew up in Atlanta. His parents, both cardiologists, were from India by way of Kenya. He studied history at Yale and was a freelance journalist whose focus was Africa. His childhood visits to his grandfather’s house in Nairobi had sparked his love of the continent.

“I had to come back. I had to face her beauty, her body constantly being abused. I wanted to be here. There is nowhere else in the world. I came to Johannesburg in 1992. I saw how this country changed. We saw the seas red in our dreams but it didn’t happen. Nelson Mandela made it so, unbelievable, my friend. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t be so kind; not after what they did here.” Why were we the ones who had to do all the forgiving? Expected to absolve the world of its mischief, our bodies rolling off the planet, pieces floating in space and we’re asked to forgive attackers.

“It doesn’t seem natural, David. If it were me, somebody, many bodies would have to fall down and not get up.”

He shook his head. “Making references to American television commercials?”

“It’s all I got.”

“But seriously, then we’re doing the same thing, right?”

“No, we’re not killing as many folks. Not even half, not even a quarter, just some, the worst of them, the ones who killed the most. I’d refuse to let those folks escape to South America like some of the Nazis did.”

“You wouldn’t let them go to Argentina? Send a few to a beach in Brazil?”

I rubbed my eyes and yelled.

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David and I sat side-by-side in white chairs. The back wall was a huge mirror. And the television attached to the wall played a *Twilight Zone* episode. The barbers draped white cloth about us before one snipped away David's shoulder length hair. My barber ran his fingers through my short afro. "Do you have a perm?"

I was puzzled. The only thing I put in my hair was shampoo and water. "No."

"Nice," he said as he turned on the clippers, his hands like giant crabs. "Ah, are those your eyes?" Here we go, I thought. It's everywhere.

"No, I replaced the real ones with these marbles."

"Is that a joke?"

"Of course," I said.

"Oh," he said, picking my hair. It was suddenly awkward. I didn't care. I asked him what he thought of his president. "It's not going well. He promised changes and there haven't been any. I feel like we are going backwards. When there is a white man running things, everything works. When a black man runs things, it all goes to shit."

I felt my whole body getting hot. "Are you black?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "but my mother is Coloured. Like you."

"I'm black not 'Coloured,' even though 'Coloureds' are black." I sucked my teeth. My nostrils flared, "So you, both you and I, inherently make things worse?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"Well, that's what you're saying. You wish apartheid had remained?"

"I'd rather have our previous president."

I thought I would explode, the top of my head spilling hot liquid orange. I didn't feel sorry for him. It was four years after apartheid had ended, and there we were.

David grabbed my arm. "It's complicated," he said. He wanted me to stop talking. His jaw clenched, small bones fluttered. I

didn't want to. I was thoroughly pissed and wanted to hear why he believed what he did. I wanted to convince him he was insane, that he needed Fanon and Rodney. I imagined those mirrors shattering: Robben Island breaking off, lifting from the sea, falling into that shop, iron jail bars as loose harpoons. When we left, I touched the mask on the wall with its wood as old as the raffia streaming from it. David rolled his sleeves. From the leather strap around his slight neck dangled a small elm carving of Africa. It rested just above a thin crop of dark hair.

"You should know better."

"What are you talking about?"

"What did you expect? You think people aren't going to be crazy after all of this? This is South Africa. People aren't used to what you're, we're talking about. You have to separate idealism from reality. This place is fucked up like this whole world. The fucking is just more recent here. That's the difference. Why haven't you learned this, Hollis? Don't judge them so harshly."

"I can't help it. I hate people who beat themselves when they should be beating the ones who're killing them."

"This is what we as humans do."

"No, this is what some human beings do and they tend to look like me. I can't stand it anymore."

"He wasn't ready, Hollis. Nobody there was ready to be pummeled by your lofty, foreign ideals. They've never heard what you said and if they have, those who said them and many who listened, disappeared, were killed. These aren't possibilities for them right now." He looked at his hands, "We were like that at some point. If we think about our families or people of our same groups, our larger racial families, we've heard what those have said over and over." I understood what he said but hated his words, hated they were spoken, hated they were alive.

"What are we supposed to do?"

"You're leaving in a year. All you can do is be kind, generous, and careful. Talk to people who want to hear you. Listen to everybody." I wanted to dig to China, bury myself after being so forthright. I still hated how they thought and understood what that thinking could do. But it was one year.

We walked to David's apartment where I met one of his girlfriends, Marie, from Angola. She was knitting something large and red and called to David as he opened the door. She ran to him nude, holding the knotted yard. Seeing me, she screamed and covered herself with a sofa cushion. "Oh, my God, why didn't you tell me you had a guest?"

"I didn't know you'd be here," David said, scratching the back of his head. I expected her to grab clothes but she stood there with that big cushion: her face, arms, caves, and feet with purple polished toenails exposed. "It is nice to meet you...."

"I'm Hollis."

"I bought some tangerines. Let's sit down and have some?" She waited for any response. I was embarrassed for her, uncomfortable, not at ease with my eyes. My vision darted about that pillow, that luminous, burnt umber skin smelling of rosemary and grapefruit.

"I'm going to go," I said. Before my excitement became too apparent, I turned toward the door.

"No, you must not," she said reaching for both of my hands, her elbows lodging into the large velvet pillow.

"Sit down, Hollis." David pushed me toward the sofa. "Marie, you're going to throw me the pillow and run into the bedroom."

"No, I'm going to take this pillow into the bedroom, put on some clothes then walk out looking somewhat presentable for you and Hollis." Peripherally, I got a glimpse of her high round ass which made me bite my tongue and quickly press my knees together.

David sat down and rested his hand on my shoulder, "She's pretty, isn't she?"

"Ah, maybe just a bit. How many times do you tell her and everyone else?"

He laughed, "And she's an engineer. She builds wells in isolated villages in Angola, Kenya, and South Africa. Her younger sister comes to Johannesburg often. Want to meet her? She's just as sexy." I was being punished, well, tested, which was punishment enough.

"I have a girlfriend." It was the first time I hated saying it, the words like sudden sleet. I hadn't seen Sarah in several months. We talked on the phone twice a week and that was too expensive. I did

love her more than my life, more than water, but my body was just that and it craved even though I didn't want it to.

"Did she come with you?"

"No."

"Where is she?"

"New Orleans."

"When is she coming to visit?"

"She's not. It costs too much."

"You're going to go fuckless for a year?"

It sounded so harsh, "I guess. It's what I'm supposed to do."

He breathed deeply. "You're a young man. You're too young to be this serious about any girl. Bodies are made for exploration. We need variety in order to live. It's what we do when we're young." He made sense, completely logical. Damn, I wanted to find Marie's sister, any attractive girl (more than one, I'd never been in a threesome) and fuck until every part of me glowed. Eventually, I met more of David's women: a redhead from Cape Town, a Chinese girl who'd lived in Nigeria since she was three, a short girl from Sudan, a lawyer from Mali. None of them knew each other but he never promised monogamy, not to any. Marie was the kindest, most interesting, and the one I saw him with most often when he was with anyone.

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"Did you finish your article?"

"Yes, and I'm working on another. I just sent it to London. The British press likes me more than the American. What else is new?" He opened his bag before pulling out a magazine, "This is for you."

I smiled, "I'd forgotten about this."

"That's all you have to say? You're published. Your first article is published in an international magazine."

It was good to see it but I'd already given up on a journalism career. In fact, it was painful looking at my byline on the somewhat glossy page, the bold headline, *GREETINGS FROM SOUTH AFRICA, An American Understands His Country for the First Time*. I knew interviewing people after a tragedy was too much

for me. I cared too much and was too aware of intrusion; I clearly wasn't as aggressive as I needed to be in order to "get the story." I knew it before I'd begun but had to try something that might, if extremely lucky, pay my bills and have a modicum of respectability as I wrote penniless plays. Out-of-luck, I was. "This is it for me."

"What are you talking about?"

"We've had many conversations about this. It took me three months and several horrible experiences to write this. I didn't want to believe people were this way. I didn't want to believe, the world over, this is where we are; how we fit. Now I do, and I'm tired."

David rested his cheek on his fist. He wouldn't stop staring at me even when the bartender placed a beer in front of him, "Coleman, you need to get laid. Nine months with no sex? I can't go a week without it. That's your problem. Your mind's all cloudy, backed up."

"So that's it, the key to everything?"

"You are too serious. I said this before. Yes, this is a serious place. This continent is a serious place. But people live because they choose too. Each day, with all of these injustices, wars. This is the piece of information I thought you'd gather. You've spoken to so many people, and yes it's awful, but they go on, as you do. As you wrote in your article, South Africa, the apartheid it had, was just like the US before segregation ended. And yes, blacks have it rough in most places. I know Asians often take on the white role when the real whites leave. We're colonized people. It's not an excuse. It's just messed up."

I wanted to tell him I was sick of all this. I wanted to go home. I wanted to see Sarah. I turned away from him, pressed my palms over my eyes, elbows on the counter. David was silent. He grabbed my forearm then let it go. He knew.

I heard what I thought were the quick wings of a bird. I removed my hands to see a pigeon that had flown through the gap in the roof. Then two others flew through, onto the counter. The bartender, attempting to hold a broom, ushered the birds out. "These things carry germs," he said.

"Leave them alone," the pregnant woman screamed, running to him.

Her hand on the broom, the baby in the other. “They bring good luck.”

“No they don’t,” the bartender said. “Sit down.”

The woman pulled at the broom. Her processed hair stuck straight up from her scalp. When the baby cried, milk dripped from her breasts. Her brown t-shirt wet, “There is nothing here but sadness,” she screamed. “I don’t want to die in sadness.” The bartender released the broom and walked away. She pressed it against her stomach and seemed bizarrely relieved (of what I didn’t know). The birds flew through the roof, their gray feathers iridescently green and purple in the sunlight.

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We took a taxi to the restaurant. We were in no mood for the bus always packed, arm pits in noses, lips smashed to nameless backs. A van four cars behind us exploded. One of its wheels spun off hitting the back of our cab. Smoke and fire, glass and steel flew in ribbons. Cars and buses swerved, one tipped over, slid into the grass and palm lined island between north and south bound traffic. The sounds of steel sliding on the asphalt, the shattering windows, sounded like war. At least, how I imagined it. We ducked to the floor. The driver asked if we were all right, his hand pressed against the back of the front vinyl seat. Later on, we’d heard it was an attack waged by a group from the Orange Free State opposing the new government. I imagined us covered in blood, glass in our backs. I heard my father’s voice telling me to be safe, telling me to protect myself. I wondered what David’s father told him. Was it in a look or words, clear, precise? His father had more to worry about. He’d traveled all over the continent, seen wars, generals in battle, pistols close, raised machetes, severed heads in greased hands. The accounts I heard and recorded, the interviews I conducted, had left my ears ringing.

We sat in the Café holding green bottles of carbonated water. “What are you going to do for the rest of the day?”

“I’m going to work, then Marie’s coming over,” he said, curling his mouth.

“Should be nice.”

“Listen, you need to have sex. When things like this happen, you need to have sex. It can make you feel like you’re somewhere else. Make you know that the body can create the feeling of love for at least twenty minutes. Call your girl. Have transcontinental phone sex. Buy a small container of Shea butter.”

I grinned. “Man, I understand what you’re saying.”

“I’m just saying. It’s rough out there.”

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I senselessly took a walk around my Hillbrow neighborhood. Not many were out, just people at phone booths passing the receivers to those after them. There were a few folks, I could tell, that wanted to get into something. The pimp was there yanking two of his girls into an empty building. He didn’t see me, thank you. There had been numerous muggings and murders, frequent rapes. He’d actually been accused of many, but these were rumors. Of course, I didn’t hear these rumors until I was about to leave South Africa. There I was acting a fool with that man almost every day, thinking he was full of shit. He could have shot me, murdered me there on the pavement, my blood rolling in lines, a hole through my partially exposed spine.

At home, I turned up Ibrahim, smashed cockroaches with my shoe, and showered. I sat in bed with my shirt off. I began to write a letter addressed to Mandela. The teal and peach flowered curtains were almost completely open. I was on the twenty-eighth floor and everything outside was smothered in a gloomy moss light. Sarah shouldn’t have to see this, I thought. It was good she didn’t. I wanted to forget this, parts of it. Well, maybe not forget it, but bury it so deeply in the cerebellum it would take weeks to find, to retrieve its translucent tissue.

I opened the door to find both Marie and David. I was stunned, perplexed but before I said anything, they took my hands. I looked at David and saw everything that continent had revealed to him. “It’s okay,” he said, “but we can’t ever talk about it.” He dropped my hands and walked toward the elevator. I waited for him to look back

but he didn't. Marie held my right hand and gently rubbed the back of my neck with her left. It was enthralling. I almost lost balance. We kissed over and over again, my back on the bed's white sheets. I turned her over and looked into her face.

We breathed hard. "This isn't right," I said, my mouth on her neck, palms over nipples. I abruptly stood pressing my face against the wall. David was probably downstairs waiting for her. His arms folded against his chest. Sarah was probably in her studio sketching, planning her next sculpture. "You agreed to this?"

"It was my suggestion," Marie whispered.

"Why?"

"You seem so hollow," she said. "It happened to David when he first came here. It's dangerous. We made this decision together."

"You need to go." But I didn't want her to. I saw us doing everything. I saw us rolling on the cockroach killing floor with black dots on our backs. I saw her against the wall, on the desk, beneath the desk, on the tiles in the bathroom, on top of the television, against the window, in the folds of the curtains. But I also saw Sarah.

When I turned around, Marie's arms were out. "It's for me too," she whispered. I didn't understand but my body did, inside her. My lips did on her skin. I was a terrible man, the worst kind. I loved and betrayed and loved again, kept it all secret, the air in that room suddenly clove.

The next morning I saw David. He was himself, the one I knew previous to the night before. We never said anything about what happened. I made it a point to seem happier around him, to forget the truth we lived. He left for Angola that evening and I assumed Marie did as well.

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A month after I'd returned to New York, Marie called me, said she'd be in the city giving a speech to some organization about the global fresh water crisis and need for wells. I sat in the back row yet didn't believe I was there, didn't know whom I'd become. She looked the same but more put together, her fitted black suit, her tall shoes.

We fucked in her hotel room downtown. There were few words, not even in the cab, not even opening the door, not even with the peeling of our clothes. We ate peaches afterwards in that big white bed. That would be it for us.

I wondered what she'd gotten from our sex, from her charity. She was the gift. I was some terrified, sheltered kid with gates finally destroyed, alone.

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Years later, David sent me a note stating he and Marie had gotten married and were living in Cape Town. They sent me a picture. I pinned it to my corkboard above the Mandela letter I never finished.