

## Foreword True Places

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*It is not down in any map; true places never are.*

**Herman Melville**, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*

One evening, a few years ago, I wrapped up my last hour of teaching at Wits University in Johannesburg and drove home. I was in a good mood: the weather was perfect, the semester had gone exceptionally well, and I had two days of nothing ahead of me, after which I was going to take a flight back to my other home—Bangalore, in India—which is where I mostly live. To get home, in Yeoville, I took a route I had taken a thousand times, down Empire Road, up a road that no one ever calls Clarendon Place but is, and on to Louis Botha Avenue, a long, narrow strip with only two lanes on each side, which makes driving along it a bit like playing a late 1980s video game: choose the left lane and get stuck behind minibus taxis as they arbitrarily lurch to a halt; stay in the right lane and get stuck behind someone who wants to turn right into Berea, Hillbrow, or Yeoville.

As I pulled up to the Clarendon Place junction, I stopped at a red light by Clarendon Court, an exquisitely distressed midcentury island of flats marooned in a sea of midcentury roads. I had my window rolled down. I had the radio on. It was my fourteenth year of living in South Africa, so when I saw a young, casually dressed man sizing me up as he leaned against the outer wall of Clarendon Court, I should have known what was coming. But I did not. Instead, I stayed frozen as he sauntered over, my window still open, my hand still resting on the door, the radio still on. He asked me

to hand over my phone, putting one hand in his pocket, saying he had a gun. I remember remaining frozen, but I must have refused, because he got mildly worked up and said he would shoot me. Right then, the lights changed, traffic moved, and so did I, rolling up my window as I accelerated. My would-be assailant tried to hold on until it became clear that his arm was no match for my electric window, so he simply cursed and ran away into Clarendon Court, or the road behind it, or the teeming inner city that lay beyond the road, or somewhere even further.

The whole thing was quite funny. I can still remember every pivot on that young man's emotional register, from the initial swagger to consternation to eventual defeat. At that point, I had lived in Johannesburg's baddest zone for so long, the program—the small, oddly specific things you're told to do when you live in an area like Yeoville—had become part of my body at a cellular level. Perhaps my cells momentarily collapsed; perhaps I thought I could will my mood onto the city. Maybe I was sick of following not just one program but several at the same time—maybe all those conflicting lines of code colliding against each other in a single day or even in a single journey had finally shut my system down. Walk anywhere in the day in the inner city, but don't walk alone after dark; don't walk anywhere at any time in the rich suburbs; seek out people; fear crowds; drive a Toyota, everyone does; never drive a Toyota, everyone wants one; drive a rubbish car that no one will steal; never drive a rubbish car because the police will haunt you; talk to people; don't talk to anyone; enjoy your freedom; fear everything.

I should confess that I spend most of the year in a city where the worst thing that ever happens is the weather. In Bangalore, people discuss the single-digit variations in temperature that mark what passes for seasonal change in the hushed tones of Northcliff neighbors discussing the latest triple homicide in Johannesburg. Don't get me wrong; it's not the boon-docks. Bangalore is a sprawling, snarling metropolis of eight million people, and I love it, but sometimes I just want to push it off a cliff. A decade ago, after the unhappy conclusion of a brief relationship with a resident of Karachi, Pakistan—one of the most unstable cities in the world—I received what remains the most withering insult ever hurled at my hometown: “And Bangalore! I mean, does it even *have* a crime rate?”

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To be sure, I don't think crime is exciting, and I don't miss the feeling of having to watch my back in public one bit when I'm away from Johannesburg. It's nerve-racking, and the reality of crime in the city—a disproportionate

reality for poor people—is heartrending and tragic. And still, through two decades of living and working in Johannesburg, crime is also not something that has actually happened to me. Perhaps it’s because I have dark skin and don’t look rich. Perhaps it’s because I’m male and built fairly big. Perhaps it’s because I have only ever lived in working-class Johannesburg, secure inside that secret fold between poverty and wealth. And mainly, perhaps, it’s because I’ve been lucky. But I offer you this anecdote of a doubtful crime to place this one little narrative against what is undoubtedly the ur-narrative of Johannesburg. I’ve loved this crucible of civilization for almost two decades now, as do millions of residents and visitors, and occasionally it can feel as if my conception of the city, the prevailing conception of the city, and even the city’s *own* conception of itself are like different motorways, all with the same signs, except leading to different places.

I felt similarly dislocated when I read *S’kop*, the first in a set of slim volumes published by Fourthwall Books in Johannesburg—each story had a limited individual run before being brought together in the book you now hold—which is to say, the story felt both wrong and revelatory. You could say that *Wake Up, This Is Joburg* has its finger on the pulse of this pulsating city. You could say that it explores, with breathtaking sincerity, the extraordinary details lurking behind the ordinary lives of people who make this city function. You could say that it chronicles a remarkable catalogue of work, from mining cow skulls to mining gold, from sorting rubbish to making bowler hats, from selling fantasy weddings in a vegetable market to building baroque fantasies in Turffontein.

As for me, I would rather think of it as the equivalent of barreling down a hundred different motorways all at once, without a care for where you might end up, because wherever you do end up, you know one thing for sure: it will be a true place.

I took some time to acknowledge my own true feelings for Johannesburg. Like every other child growing up in Soviet-aligned India, I dreamed of going west and living in a fabulous Western city surrounded by fabulous Western things. What I didn’t know then was that the Western city I yearned for was in South Africa, which, to be fair, is to the west of India. Try as I might—and I have—I cannot see Johannesburg as a festering sore in need of medical attention. I know the poverty, inequality, and crime statistics; in fact, I work with them on a daily basis in my life as an activist. In some factual manner, I get that Johannesburg is a wretched city, divided by a growing income gulf, plagued by persistent racism, rife with class

tension, teeming with crime, blistered by xenophobia, crowned with corruption, and inflicted with bad governance. But I did not grow up in Amsterdam or London or Boston, and I don't think cities can be defined by their worst problems. I cannot recognize the specter of imminent apocalypse that's invoked every time a new pothole appears on a road, and I am not traumatically shocked when a member of the police force asks for a bribe.

I'm sure I have low standards—spend an hour in Bangalore and you'll agree. I know I have some, but hopefully not too much, of the heartless immunity to poverty that other African immigrants to Johannesburg will recognize. Endless power cuts and the abject failure of the state are not bugs; they've been features of my daily life since I was born. Let me put this bluntly. Some people see Johannesburg as hell. I see it as a modern Western city, full of unimaginable freedoms, and run by black people: paradise. I'm not ashamed of what I feel—I think I live a responsible and engaged life, and I know it's possible to deeply love a deeply flawed city without having it imply a lack of concern for those trapped in its flaws.

This is my true Johannesburg: the glittering Western cosmopolis filled with desire and possibility and mobility, where everyone from every class and every race collides; where everything is questioned; where nothing is what it is or will be; and which is something that transforms itself, and me, every second of every day.

When I was about ten years old, I watched cycles and scooters overtake us as our car stalled in dense traffic, and I asked my father why we couldn't simply blow our horn and push them off the road—I assumed it was our right, being in a car that could go faster than two-wheelers, to go faster than two-wheelers. My father, a radar engineer who isn't normally given to moments of empathy with the class struggle, saw through my question. I was asking why we, as upper-class, upper-caste residents of Bangalore, did not have more of a right to the road than people who were not. "The reason we're not being murdered in our beds by all these people," he said, in a matter-of-fact voice, "is because they can overtake us on the roads."

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I thought of my father's words in Rio de Janeiro, some years ago, at a dinner hosted by a French investment banker. I was just getting to know Brazil. His magnificent house in São Conrado had sweeping views of the South Atlantic; the pâté was perfect; the wine, wonderful; and except for my partner and me, everyone else in the room was white. As we looked out onto the ocean, I asked him the one question that was eating me up:

We had been in Rio for weeks and hadn't met a single middle-class black person. What was the deal with that? He shrugged. Were there any at his bank? I asked. None that he could think of, he replied, at least none in positions that mattered. "You know what the strangest thing about it is," he continued, expanding on the fact that 50 percent of the population had zero representation at his bank, "They don't seem to mind. They just don't seem to mind." As we left his house that night, one of the four armed security guards on the night shift clicked open an enormous metal gate. A flotilla of lights connected to an electronic security system blinked into submission, and another guard escorted us to our car. As we drove off, his military-grade security apparatus swung back into place, the guards retreating into their bunkers as the thick, opaque gate sealed shut, turning the whole place into an impenetrable fortress once again.

No, I thought: they *do* mind.

I could go on endlessly about the remarkable similarities and differences between the daily churn in Bangalore, Rio, and Johannesburg, the three cities I have lived and worked in for the better part of my adult life, but that's a subject for another time. I will say, though, that after having spent some time in the usual outposts of civilization, and having chosen to spend far more time in the tropical destinations I call home, stable societies get on my nerves. I'm convinced they're just better at hiding their flaws. Sure, I'd choose Sweden over Syria if those were the only choices, but give me the rampantly unequal, multi-ethnic, multiracial, multilingual democracies I've lived in over Scandinavia every single time. Even my bovinely placid Bangalore is churning; stubbornly and passive-aggressively, but churning it is—with conflicts over class, caste, language, and skin color flaring up at every turn. We may have no gun crime, but this city has been fiercely negotiating power and belonging from the moment it was formed, and the churn shows no signs of slowing.

When it comes down to it, there's no contest, really: as the youngest, loudest, and brashest of all third-world megalopolises, Johannesburg churns like it's being struck repeatedly by lightning bolts. The ferociousness of change can be disorienting; the direction and velocity of the change, whiplash-inducing. The change can be thrilling and liberating; it can be painful and debilitating. And I'd like to believe that the exciting, unsettling mess it leaves in its wake is something that will, one day, look a lot like progress.