

A close-up look at homelessness-in-the-making.



Eric Miller

eviction through a zoom lens

joyce harris

The time is midday on a warm Summer afternoon. The place is the pavement in Wanderers Street, Johannesburg, outside Branksome Towers. Protea Court is a little further up the street.

Like any other member of the public I have read headlines in the press from time to time saying such things as 'At least 80 families - about 300

people - were evicted from their flats...' or 'Sixty families pushed out on the pavements.' And I have felt sorry for them and wondered what would become of them. But time has passed, other events have intervened, and I have forgotten about them.

This time I went to see for myself: to see ordinary, decent, working, earning black people, black families, made

'illegal' through the combination of discriminatory laws and an acute housing shortage. People thrust on to the pavement outside their buildings, their possessions scattered helter-skelter around them, wondering where they were going to spend the night, what was going to become of them, whether it would rain on their possessions and devastate them even further.

These people were apparently being evicted for non-payment of rent arrears but all around were stories that they had not been informed that the Rent Board had increased their rent; or that they had the money available but had been unable to make contact with the agent who was supposed to collect it; or that the money had been refused because it was late.

They are not criminals. They are working people or mothers with children to care for. They have been earning sufficient to pay the rents set by the Rent Board, exorbitant though they appear to be in terms of what is offered and the general condition of the buildings. They are responsible human beings paying their dues to the community and trying to get on with their lives, caring for themselves and their families and asking nothing but to be left in peace in the homes they have managed to find for themselves.

Their good humour in the circumstances is amazing, their friendliness, their helpfulness to each other, their readiness to talk to anyone with a friendly face. They have been evicted from their homes. The Sheriff, assisted by the police, has 'entered and removed'. It must be said that those who were doing the moving seemed to be taking care. But nevertheless things got broken. A box of crockery was dropped. People's homes were spread along the pavement, in the gutter, in the street.

There is always something rather pitiful about the exposure to the public gaze of the accoutrements of

people's lives. Look at any household in the process of an ordinary, normal move. Goods and chattels waiting to be loaded have a curiously detached, abandoned, lost look about them, moved out of their context. The home in which they belong has been dismantled. None of the loving thought which has gone into their acquisition and their placing is visible. They always look sad.

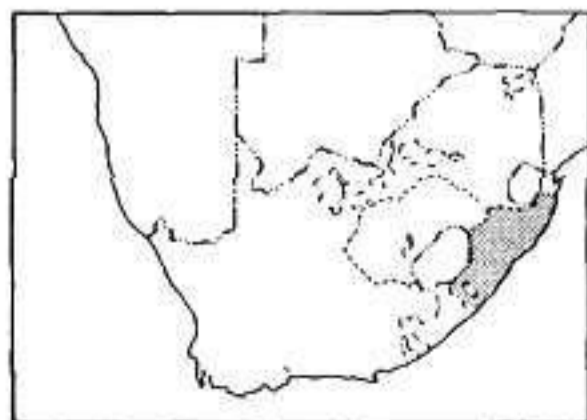
But when a home has been forcibly dismantled, when its contents have been summarily dumped on the pavement and in the street, when they are subjected to the unsympathetic and sometimes hostile gaze of passers-by, they make one want to weep. One thinks of how hard the lives of most of the occupants of such flats must inevitably have been, how hard they still are, how they must have struggled to acquire all those possessions, big and small, that go towards the creation of a home. And one looks at beds and bedclothes and tables and chairs and cupboards and buckets of kitchenware and fridges and mirrors and curtains - all clean, all cared for, all the culmination of someone's dreams or hopes or efforts. The dispossessed children are climbing over them, looking for a little fun. Bits of paper blow around them. Some are precariously balanced. Others look better built for survival.

One looks, and one wonders about man's inhumanity to man and about a system that can allow such things to happen, and about the callousness and heartlessness of all of us who read or see or pass by and who forget. □

nowhere to live, nowhere to go

Homelessness is a phenomenon usually associated with a major natural disaster. But in South Africa the devastating summer floods made only a minor contribution to the staggering statistical news that one in every six South Africans is homeless. Joyce Harris sums up the material presented at the National Conference on this theme.

Between them, the Group Areas Act, the Land Acts and the Black Communities Development Act are responsible for the crisis of homelessness which is besetting the entire country, in rural as well as urban areas. These laws zone land racially, they control who may live where, and they apportion approximately 13% of the land to approximately 80% of the people. All this has had - and is still having - dire consequences for millions of dispossessed people.



Natal



Homeless, Mr Samuel Nyaole of the Eastern Cape, sits where he lives, surrounded by everything he owns.