

SOMETHING TO LIVE FOR

By Klaus Maphepha

In New York travellers do not wait for the train. They look for it. It is there always. One shuttles away only to give platform space to the other ; unceasing steel veins in the depth of New York.

As I touched the subway platform, I also craned my neck and looked for the train in the dark tunnel-way. No. 6 rattled into the Third Avenue platform and slid into a grating stop. Its doors winked like shutters as we leaped in. It sneaked out of the platform and immediately clattered into the dark tunnel. From Bronx the train descends upon the city.

I squinted for an empty seat. There was none although the train was not full. I sought for balance against a vertical steel bar. I gained it. I pulled out a copy of *Harper's* and paged through to the headline 'Revolt on the Veldt'. My four weeks in New York had taught me that people there do not have time to read anywhere else but in the subway. So in order to ingratiate myself with the place, I carried that magazine into the subway. Although the article discussed South Africa's guerrilla resistance, I studied more the people

around me than the article. I could always go back to *Harper's* under the funnel of my bed-side lamp.

Life had put a pair of whitish horn-rimmed spectacles on the nose of the man standing in front of me. The nostrils which opened into two tubas contrasted with the meek but incisive eyes which were gliding on the glossy pages of *Esquire*. He must have been forty-five and with a resolve of his own when he tuned in his transistor radio and learned of Martin-Luther King Jr's assassination. In my mind I immediately begin to see him bounce out of his chair. He paces his miniscule apartment four times before he stops suddenly and peers through the window hopefully, seeking a non-confirmation from the throbbing Harlem of shoeshine urchins and newspaper vendors. Harlem wore a blank face of gray dizziness. The transistor voice had insisted, cold, hollow and metallic.

More white people jumped into the train as we moved away from the Bronx towards the city centre a jarring reminder that America is still segregated. The tuba-nosed man made it onto a seat at last. He hung one leg on the other and got



sucked into the pages of his magazine. Clad in a slightly oversized chestnut suit whose trousers pulled up to the belly button, the wrinkle between his legs told of a fine suit. His light-brown shoes were cut and tanned by Florsheim. I knew them from window shopping at Hollywood Men's Shop and Ajmeri Arcade in Durban. It was our favoured hobby back at home, as young boys in the township, to tell labels of expensive clothing from a mere outside look. It had become part of our township culture, we studied whatever we could not afford. That's what our lives were made of: vague window shopping, crazy trains and incessant giggles of urchins drunk with benzine. Even the man's off white sweater underneath I knew. It was knitted by Cashmere. This man set my mind back to the township of the old timers who brought everything by Stetson, listened to Mankunku and talked fervently of Coltrane. It had all made suicide a boring undertaking.

The Black lady next to him did not lift up her eyes from her novel as he sat next to her. She only fidgeted welcomingly. She was wearing long suede boots, taut jeans, and a poncho draped in all the colours of the rainbow. Her hair was fried into a beret of shiny filigrees. She was reading a thick novel. It took me some time to spy the author — Sydney Sheldon, a best seller then.

Her long red nails lay flat on the deep outside cover. Kent — white smoke curled out of her lips, seemingly more from habit than out of any purpose. Long red nails on the bloodless body of the sky. Who is this eunuch of the twentieth century who has kissed our women with red? Long red nails, red lips waving smoky shoots celebrating the bonanza of Western Civilisation. It is the train coming to a stop which cut off that poetic traffic of thought running through my mind.

The horn-rim-spectacle-man jumped out. I took his seat. The lady in a poncho did not lift her eyes as I sat next to her. The train pulled away and we tossed into the dark hole.

In a strange country, they say it's better to uncover your ignorance of the place to a woman than to a man. I don't know the real reasons, but they may prove too controversial. But one of them says women possess less physique to wrestle one out of one's purse. I turned towards the poncho lady and asked my question with no apparent eagerness; give her the option of ignoring the question without dislodging my Adam's Apple. "I always wondered at the idea behind the graffiti in these trains?"

She chose to respond. She lifted her eyes. Not to me but to the graffiti on the walls of the coach, as if I had broached a subject she had never thought about. Her eyes fell on the magazine photo-cutting pasted in front of us. A hobo must have derived amusement at leaving it there in full view of the public. It was the work of a photographer who specialised in making nudes look like vegetables. The lady did not blush. She studied more graffiti and her eyebrows jerked up as if nudged by an invisible elbow. She shrugged and said, "Well, I guess it's an American craze." She said it with the same lack of eagerness, with that oily American accent of illusive syllables sliding out of her lips. Her eyes dropped back into her novel without ever looking in my direction.

All subway trains in New York are scrawled

and splashed with graffiti. The graffiti made no sense to me, and I guess neither to New Yorkers. The slant is more to Arabic. At least to the eye. It must have been as an afterthought when she turned her cone-shaped face to me and asked, "Are you Nigerian?"

Most Americans think that all Africans are Nigerians and Africa is one country.

"What is your criterion, sister?" I regretted after I had asked the question. I knew that she was embarrassed because she smiled like a filly. She shrugged again.

"Well, your cheekbones and that loaded accent." She answered. It was my turn to get embarrassed. I got embarrassed at her ignorance of the history of her slavery. I hated to tell her that I'm not Nigerian but an African still. I simply shook my head.

The crowd thrusting from the platform at Grand Terminal conveyed into our coach a threadbare and scraggy man. He wobbled and collapsed on the floor. He was sandwiched between two shapeless boards scrawled in white, "I am a Viet. I am hungry. Give me money."

The area around him began to clear as people shuffled away from him. By increasing the distance between themselves and the man on the floor, New Yorkers seemed to say, New York is impersonal. Don't encroach upon my privacy. Your freedom ends where mine begins.

He climbed on his knees and arms. He crawled towards us. Passengers shuffled further away and others filed into the adjacent coach. His smell began to fill the whole coach. His blond hair had been plaited by dirt, sweat and oil into disheveled threads.

He smelled like a putrefying grimalkin. He cleared his throat vehemently and catapulted his phlegm across. It stuck on the foggy window like a green postal stamp that sent me thinking of the many letters I could not write home.

The cone-faced lady's nose was already on tiptoes. She had closed her novel and was looking askance at this bedbug crawling on the snow-white collar of civilised society. I jostled her lightly and said, "What is a Viet, sister?"

She stood and then stooped towards me. "He is a Vietnam veteran." She whispered. She drifted away from us, the smell was becoming unbearable.

I had changed trains by the time I reached Manhattan, my destination. The multitude surged as we burrowed out of the subway, out of a hole like the contents of a toothpaste tube. In the street the cold bite of winter sucked my face like a teething cub.

From the corner of 157th street and Broadway, Sithombo's apartment was only four blocks away. I did not know her but when she had phoned me in my friend's apartment in Bronx, she had summarily given me directions to her place. She had spoken in Zulu that was unadulterated, self-effacing but uncompromising. My Zulu stammered in my throat, uncertain and shy. It made me happy and angry at myself, as if I had always thought that Zulu cannot find its way into a telephone receiver. I resorted to English without avoiding a blush.

Over the phone her voice was thick and torn. It scraped my eardrum, the feeling one gets when a shovel bumps on gravel. She said she had heard

that I write poetry. She wanted us to discuss new South African Black literature as she worked as a columnist for a local cultural magazine called *Afro-Splash*. I had hesitated. I was still contemplating declining the invitation for fear of failing below her expectation when she cut in with a question. "Have you devoured Serote's *To every Birth Its Blood?*" I accepted triumphantly. I had read it twice. This gave me a measure of confidence. I accepted her invitation. Snow-flakes began to drizzle. I also began to run against the blistering wind.



I pressed the doorbell. The door swung open. Sithombo stood before me, too small, too thin for her clothes. Judging from the contours of her face, accentuated by her elated smile, she must have been on the better end of the forties. From her turn I concluded that her limbs were still swift. Her loose knitted skirt followed her and clung to the body like a nervous mountaineer. Her skirt, although it looked old, did not offend her turtle-neck sweater of angora.

I sank into an ottoman sofa and got the feeling of being swallowed by an amoeba. The apartment was beautiful and modest. There weren't more than six pieces of furniture in the room, all placed with an economic sense for space.

"Call me Sithombo." She said making for the other door which I guessed led to a bedroom. "I prefer to be called that way. I know you are young, young enough to be my son." She broadened her smile to show me that her words carried no insolence. I didn't think it was necessary to respond. I simply returned her smile to set her at ease.

Out of the bedroom emerged a chubby bald head who shook my hand thrice with a vice-grip. He introduced himself as Cliff. He sat in front of me with his stomach cantilevered over his legs. He sat there eyeing at me and I wondered if he was not studying my face as I studied his. We sat eyeing each other like two specimens in a test-tube. His face was the kind familiar in a Harlem corner drugstore.

That evening they drove me out for dinner at Sweet Basil. Abdullah Ibrahim and Carlos Ward were on feature for the evening. Abdullah hopped on his notes. They clanked and sounded like a series of insistent questions. He leaped and ambled. He prowled in and out of the pit of things. Carlos minced the thick air in the club with his horn. They blended into a conversation of incriminations and recriminations. When the exchange became acrimonious, a big tear hung on Sithombo's left eye. It was as big as an untrampled dew drop. When it decided to fall, it splashed on her ashtray like diamond on a cutter's table.

Back in her apartment Sithombo listened to Abdullah, Makeba and Ndlazilwana. She discussed brilliantly. She took more Haig Scotch Whiskey as if it was a potion against all nostalgia. She puffed more Kool smoke which turned lavender under the influence of lights. Cliff left. Another man came. He seemed also to have access into Sithombo's bedroom.

Sithombo took alcohol phenomenally. Her shoulders drooped when she had taken too much. The glass which was always in her hand quivered and spilled over with every gesture. I began to understand that the bleach on her lower lip was not born with her. She began to tell me the story of her life. The narration seemed to touch her. She wizened around her eyes like a withered aristocrat.

She had left South Africa in the early 70's. Whilst she worked as a model for Lever Brothers in Durban, she had spiralled into bed with a White film director. They were caught red-handed. Her partner's lawyer advised them to quit. In America her lover developed a heart condition. One hot summer night in a club he fell. He had collapsed. Simply. Permanently. "The tragedy transfixed my soul on a dry thorn like a dry locust," she said as she showed me into another bedroom.

The next morning she remained in her bedroom until late. I wanted to go back to the Bronx. I hesitated in front of her door, before tapping it very lightly with two fingers.

Inside the blinds were drawn tight against the winter outside. Lights were off except for a bedside lamp which syringed a pool of light into a notebook in Sithombo's left hand. She was sitting on the bed with her back against the wall. The heavy blanket covered her only up to the waist and her floral flannel pyjamas took care of the rest. Next to her, not exactly covered by the light, lay one of her visitors. He lay with his face

down. I sized his bust. It was not Cliff. When I entered he peered over his shoulder like a one-eyed gargoyle. He never looked my direction again.

I helped myself to the chair nearby. Sithombo tore a page from her notebook and extended it to me. She pressed something and a shower of light fell on the paper in my hand. I began to read.

She was writing about the events of the day before, at sweet Basil. Each sentence WAS what it inevitably had to be. Not a line seemed superfluous. Ideas, images were austere and simple until one looked at them and realized what work, what complexity of method, what tension of thought had achieved that beauty of words.

When I looked at her she had closed her eyes. "Why don't you write a novel?" I said with a serious face. "Who'll publish it?" She said despondently without opening her eyes. "But you said you write for a cultural magazine? Prospects look good. They can put you through."

"*Afro-Splash* is only a community baby. Poor people, I mean. Big publishing houses want something that will run in the market. Who in America wants stories about Kippie Moeketsi, about Kwa-Mashu and Magaliesberg? That is not sensational."

I had words to continue the argument. I still had a lot to tell her. I looked at her forehead, her closed eyes. She stretched her arm and fumbled for something in the shade of the lamp. She came back with a glass half-full. My eyes followed it to her mouth. As the content ebbed it began to smell. It was a sharp pang of Dry Gin. I looked at her forehead again. I looked at that flower blushing in the desert unseen.

"America is a jungle and I haven't mastered its laws. I know I'm a worse beggar than those

who infest the streets of New York." She wiped her eyes and let them open. "I say I'm worse because, as you said in dissimilar words, I'm a guilty beggar. I wish my epitaph to read: SHE WAITED FOR DEATH."

As I stood up ready to go she said, "I'll see you to the subway." She closed the door behind us and we tossed into the snow. With shoots of vapour steaming out of our nostrils and our shoes caked thick with snow, we looked like an odd couple. The wind nibbled at my nose, threatening to break it. We passed a beggar. He had just pulled out a sewerage lid and was seeking warmth from the nauseating gas the way a nightwatchman would do to a brazier. As we passed, from below the thick neck of her sweater, Sithombo murmured, "They are the flower-pots of New York".

I had seen many beggars and lunatics in South Bronx, Madison Avenue and Broadway. Sithombo's comment did not make me think about beggars but about the severity of winter. A thought about beggars always rolls a cold ball of lead into my stomach. I never spin a cent in their direction. They are pimples and it is the blood that needs to be cleansed; a cent from some good Samaritan doesn't make their case better.

As we moved along kicking cakes of snow, Sithombo elbowed my ribs and pointed at the three-wheel bike of a newspaper vendor. Splash headlines read, "Guerrilla Raids On Apartheid Institutions Increase!" Sithombo sighed a sigh which died as she beamed with excitement. She picked up the newspaper. Her eyes became comically round. As the newspaper unfolded in her hands, she said, "Perhaps such news gives us hope *there is something to live for* after all."



THE BALANCED NEWS STORY

They seek Sakharov
with boldface headlines
And 45 seconds tomes.

No one misses Mandela
They don't know how to
Spell Robben Island.

John A. Williams