

Strange Encounters Or Bernard, Peter and The Cowboy

Through all those decades, Africa wove such tapestries for us. They may well fade in time, but not before the last member of the British South Africa Police has ridden away forever.

We were fortunate enough to have lighter moments to help us through the grim realities of policing our patch of the dark continent. I was always intrigued by the number of harmlessly deranged people who ambled through our lives. Adrift in the world of the sane, their condition insulated them against the ugliness of Life. Certainly I seldom saw an unhappy one, and I remember many of them in far greater detail than thousands of other faces that flitted by.

Take Bernard. You never seemed to see him coming in. There'd be the usual Sunday night bedlam of shouting, arguing and weeping in the Charge Office as black Africa counted the cost of one last, defiant gesture against the inevitability of Monday. Mzilikazi simmered all week with an occasional explosion of real violence and the on-going climate of petty crime and domestic friction that prevails in every low income, densely populated residential area in the world.

And suddenly, you'd look up and he'd be there. Sitting between the man bleeding morosely in the corner and the bare-breasted woman, clutching her squalling infant and shouting her discontent through the interpreter. The floor would be spotted with blood, beer (before or after filtration through human kidneys) a-litter with garments, baskets, blankets and leaking plastic bags. Pretorius would be leaning over the counter, showing a ham-like fist to a swaying complainant, another botched statement snatched from the battered Olivetti in his other hand.

His constable would be stolidly repeating the tirade in the vernacular. It wasn't so much that they changed their stories, just that Pretorius wasn't the world's fastest typist - a story is not to be told without embellishment - it cannot be coldly reduced to black marks on white paper. A man must live the story he is telling, and when the drink is in him he warms to an attentive audience.

Through it all, Bernard would sit there. Dressed in the same ragged brown-checked sports jacket, with the hairy sisal string about his waist to close it, his hands beneath his thighs on the cold concrete bench. Bare feet neatly together below the torn, grey trouser legs. He was grave and bearded in the peppercorn African fashion, and his fuzzy bush of hair was usually full of grass seeds and stalks, so I suppose he slept out most nights. He had only one expression. Sad and thoughtful, with his eyes full of unspoken things. Things that only Bernard could understand. We spoke to him often and he would listen gravely and politely but nobody had ever heard him speak or utter a sound. So he was left alone and seemed to like it that

way. I came to welcome his silent vigils. Sometimes it was as though he and I were the only sane ones in a world of unhappiness, pain and aggression. In the end, I was the only person who ever heard him make a sound.

It was the night Bernard sat beside the drunken taxi-driver. I was standing very close. My constable was translating an angry statement from the fat and trembling mother of a snuffling child. There was a long and vehement torrent of vernacular, too rapid for my halting Sindebele to follow, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bernard stiffen. He leaned forward slowly, the better to see the speaker and sat there staring at her. His lips were moving silently, the stubbly beard bobbing.

The woman's voice died away and she sat awkwardly comforting the child, scrubbing at her flat nose with the heel of one plump hand. The subject of Bernard's intent scrutiny showed every sign of huge embarrassment, and gradually the rest of that noisy crowd fell silent, too.

Bernard looked down at the floor for a long time, and then almost imperceptibly, shook his head from side to side. Then he let out the loudest and most eloquent Bantu click of disgust I ever heard. Another sad shake of his head and he rose and stalked out with enormous dignity. I thought I heard another click as he went down the steps but I couldn't be sure.

The motley sea of black faces watched the door for some time in silence and when the noise grew again, it was subdued. I'm not saying that Bernard's patent disapproval had any effect on all those normal people. For he really was quite, quite mad.

Peter Shova was always good for a laugh. You'd hear the ringing of his bicycle bell at the gate and look out of the window to see the gate guard waiting for permission to let him in. A wave of the hand would bring two answering flashes of white teeth, and Peter would sweep in grandly on his beloved bicycle and fuss about, locking it to the banisters at the front entrance. He carried a stout chain for the purpose and a lock that would have held Godzilla.

He was short and very cheerful if you knew how to handle him. Which most of us did. Peter was very public-spirited and must have enjoyed a good education, because he was fluent in English and Afrikaans as well as two or three Bantu languages. His education showed in the long letters he wrote to the Bulawayo City Council, flowery and full of the clichés to be found in "The Better Letter Writer" - a set book for African schools. The city fathers had been moved enough by one such epistle to greatly improve the standard of public toilets and municipal beer-halls.

Peter never lost an opportunity to flourish the dog-eared, thumbled response from the Council that started off "*Dear Mr Shova, We are in receipt of your letter dated...*", below the ornate Municipal crest of an elephant rampant, bisected by an oblique brown crease that showed daylight in places.

He'd smooth it out on the counter, adding more stress and grime, and then launch into his latest complaint. Someone always found time to listen to him and he always left satisfied. If you were too busy, a good ploy was to slide a pencil and paper across the cracked Formica to him and let him write a formal statement. Most of us had one or two of those tucked away for posterity.

One sweltering Christmas, I was driving up Abercorn Street when I saw a seasonal Santa on the corner, Fat and jolly in the best tradition, and equipped with a really clangorous bell he was sweatily exhorting shoppers to patronise a Bata shoe shop. As he turned my way, I had a momentary glimpse of a shining, black cherubic face only half concealed by a moulting cotton wool beard before the happy shout of recognition from Peter. Somehow, after that, Santa's will never be the same.

I also recall, after my transfer to Bulawayo Central, a white faced motorist, coming into the Central Charge Office to report a near miss on the road from Makokoba to Mpilo Hospital. He'd hooted at a lone pedestrian in the middle of the northbound lane and expected him to leap to the verge. Only reflectors festooned on string across the man's back had made him visible in the first place, and instead of the usual dash to safety, he'd made an imperious gesture for the motorist to overtake him.

All I could do was thank him, sigh, collect my cap and swagger stick, and take the Duty Inspector's car out to talk to Peter again.

It didn't help. We never ever got him to accept that he didn't own a bicycle. He bought a bicycle licence every year and displayed it in a disc holder on his belt. Along with the bell and the reflectors.

John the Baptist re-incarnated, that was Cowboy. This towering, wild and ragged figure that was sent to try us from time to time. He was intelligent, of that there was no doubt, conversing in three languages at once, delivering shouted monologues in fluent English on any subject. It was also quite apparent that he was enormously powerful and nobody cared to try his patience, such as it was.

Cowboy, in good form, could clear a charge office of the more timid and sober citizens and it took some effort to remind oneself of Queen and Country and that joining the exodus might be construed as deserting one's post.

Redolent with the smoky, bush smell of the truly uncivilised, and draped with such trinkets as a motorcar timing chain and other assorted refuse from the Municipal tip-site, he would strike a pose and recite a few lines from the Bard or the Bible – with improvisations, as the mood took him.

The worst was when he leaned over the counter, accoutrements clanking and leaking sump oil on your paperwork, and with a gaunt hand that looked and smelled as though it had been exhumed, slowly and painfully crushed your wrist or hand, while he told you what a fine job you were doing. Having felt that grip, I could imagine its effect on a new recruit, riveted to his stool, typing arrested, goggling at this apparition, whose scabrous grasp and hypnotic glare were draining away his new-found authority along with his circulation.

Although preferable to the criminal element, Cowboy tended to be larger than life, and seemed to lurk outside the station until we were at our busiest. Then he would stride imperiously past the gate-guard, trailing his rags like the robes of a prophet, a-clink with this week's ironmongery, full of a real lust for life and a good session of the Scriptures - according to Cowboy.

One memorable late afternoon, an irate, out of town bus driver pounded up the steps and demanded that we inspect the front of his bus. Some strange, gaunt vagrant had damaged it badly, he said. And for no apparent reason.

The radiator grill of a township bus is subjected to many external stresses, such as flung stones, flying chickens and the occasional errant cyclist and his load. The prudent fleet operator welds a wire screen across the radiator, to match the ones on the windscreen and windows.

This bus had enjoyed such protection, until some considerable force had broken four of the stout spot-welds and left the twisted mesh hanging drunkenly askew and the radiator itself deformed. I should have known when I saw the passengers at the far side of the bus, pushing and jostling for a better view of the all too familiar figure that raged up and down. Cowboy was grandstanding again. To a very appreciative audience, who had no intention of leaving the safety of the bus.

Piecing it all together in a saner moment, I could only marvel at the resilience of Cowboy's skull, for that was exactly what he used to attack the bus. Ever conscious of his dignity, he'd been forced to detour around the front of the bus when he found it blocking his path, but his forbearance failed him when there was a loud and derogatory hiss from the hydraulics.

He'd halted in mind-stride and turned on the vehicle in a rage, butting it with his head. He had no quarrel with the driver or the passengers, and when the overheated engine died, he considered honour satisfied.

He was certainly his own man. In another age he might have been a holy man. We just called him Cowboy.

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