

THE COLOUR OF THE NIGHT

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TRAVELLING TO JOHANNESBURG last year, I made an unscheduled stopover in Nairobi. I was flying in from home, India, and had missed my connection. My interregnum lasted only 15 hours, but it felt interminable.

First, the frayed straps of my sandals gave out. Then I had to endure the company of some similarly stranded Indians. Gopal liked his Africans cussed and mocked, missing no opportunity to hurl insults at passing strangers. Cleverly, the insults were in Hindi, thus unintelligible to anyone but us. Bhavna supplied the obligatory giggle. “Ten years. Then, I leaving South Africa,” Gopal said, “It all going to dogs. Too many *blex*.” Bhavna grunted understandingly.

We arrived in Johannesburg at 3 am. After being mildly harassed by Immigration for entering the country barefoot, I exited, and nodded to the first taxi driver who caught my eye. As I followed him out, a Pakistani taxi driver, also competing for passengers, caught hold of me. “Don’t trust these people, they’ll rob you,” he said in Urdu. I pretended I didn’t understand him and carried on, though what I really wanted to do was stop, duck into a corner and quietly shoot myself.

By the next afternoon, all violent impulses had subsided. Walking the streets of Yeoville on a sunny summer afternoon has that effect. It’s the only place I know which affords a degree of racial anonymity. As much as I appreciate that progressive South African Indians have made my acceptance and entry into South Africa much easier, constantly belonging to a race is a bit of a strain.

In Yeoville, the man selling shoes is a Senegalese Christian, the cigarette stall next to him is manned by an Azerbaijani Muslim, and both of them are equally uncurious about my accent or my features -- an atmosphere that’s more up my street, and in fact, literally is.

And then there is the House of Tandoor. Its entrance on Rockey Street is innocuous and easily missed; once inside, the ground floor hosts remarkably filthy toilets and narrow iron steps that lead up to the main spot. It’s a small, crowded bar, with ample seating and dancing space, some pool tables, an indifferent kitchen and a really bad sound system that cranks out really good dancehall. Adding that healthy touch is a fruit shop in the middle of it all, run by a polite German youth who wears a permanently entranced smile.

Tandoor is open-air and a favourite spot is the area overlooking the lights and traffic of Rokeby Street. The air is dense with dagga, desire and Caribbean dreams. I've met people from St Kitts, Soweto, Harare and Houghton. I've had free beers and free herbs thrust on me by strangers, and I've been sweet-talked by Joburg's black gay hipsters and her weekend poets. The name, rather wonderfully, bears no relation to the space (Tandoori food went off the menu about the same time as the swish set went off Yeoville), and the only concession to theme is the spirit.

But in this city of the plastic fantastic, it is perhaps no surprise that the tentacles of thematic décor have gripped places as far afield as Soweto. The *New York Times* recently gushed over the Backroom (in Pimville), and its adjoining parking lot, replete with BMWs and Mercs. The Backroom, like Herman's Place in Protea, is for oldies; the difference being that the Backroom wants you to show up in a suit and a Teutonic automobile, while Herman's Place would be happy if you just showed up.

Neither place is as trendy as the Rock, a high-class watering hole in high-class Rockville. I was introduced to it many moons ago by Niq Mhlongo, whose literary career was born in neighbouring Tshiawelo, as was he. On Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights, the Rock is packed tighter than a suburban train in Bombay, except that the ambience is better and the body odour nicer. Sure, the Rock has its fancy touches, like the ice embedded in the bar so that your beer stays cold, but it's a pretty basic place. The music, mainly kwaito and house, is freshly mixed and pumping, the sound system is excellent, and dancing is encouraged everywhere. And it really doesn't matter that I'm usually the only Indian in the place.

Sometimes in Soweto, it's quite amusing. I'm regularly assured when eating out that my food is halaal. It's well intentioned but bizarre, given that I am Hindu, a bit like me asking a Zulu adolescent from Durban if he enjoyed his circumcision ritual. Once I was introduced to a friend of Niq's, whose name, it turned out, was Nkululeko. I dropped my keys as he introduced himself, so I didn't hear what he said. I asked him if he could repeat his name. "Just call me Freedom," he replied, offended. I asked him if he could pronounce my name. He shook his head sullenly.

It's a simple truth: the more you hang around places where your race is scarce, the more natural it becomes. I haven't been to white clubs, possibly because I don't know what or where they are, but I have been to a so-called "coloured" nightclub – Cantina Tequila in Rosebank, which was more of a fightclub really, given the three brawls in 20 minutes.

There is no particular ideology at play here, just circumstance – and the fact that I have to go to places that accommodate my income. The last time I went to the Rock was with Valentine Cascarino, the Cameroonian-born chronicler of Joburg's down and desperate. On our way back, we decided to stop in Hillbrow. Valentine was in the mood for "research". I was the sidekick. First, the good news. There is at least one place in South Africa where non-racialism actually exists; where miscegenation is not only possible, it's the norm. The bad news: it's a strip-club in Hillbrow.

Hillbrow is a vivid, national hallucination; its racial oddities a distraction from the den-of-vice theme. Sex, beer and money collide at the Royal Park "hotel", in an atmosphere that mimics Sandton City. Its ladies were out in full force, some of them dancing distractedly on stage, others circulating with nervous Indian and black college kids, and with what looked like a big group of white executives.

The considerably less spiffy Moulin Rouge wore a tired look. One of the sex workers

was noticeably Indian, and I could hear her loudly abusing an overzealous client in Zulu. It was 2 am, and even the working girls just wanted to go to sleep. Two of them, in particular, wanted to go to sleep with us. They came up to talk, friendly and shy, “just to meet”. An Indian man, chewing a toothpick and playing pool, looked up at me and drew a finger across his throat. “You’re not from here. Be careful who you are with.” He cast a sinister glance sideways.

I was puzzled, and looked around in confusion until I realised he was warning me about Valentine. I shook my head miserably and Valentine laughed out loud. But as we drove off into a rainy night, the comic, disquieting honesty of that moment lingered.