



MAY 1984

For a neat line in grim satire, Tony Weaver is not readily beaten. Law-evasion, too – check the smart way he does not finger South Africa's army for murder. Re-reading Tony, 24 years on, amplifies the schizophrenia that is life on the southern tip of Africa. On the one hand, ineffable joy that wars are gone, with a pride at how far we have come. On the other hand the perpetual question: Why does anyone who can leave the country, stay? (Three good answers. 1: hell, it's interesting. 2: it'd be much more fun getting things working here than going to where things work already. 3: it's home. But the question never dies.)

Oh, what a lovely revolution

Tony Weaver keeps an eye on Namibia from the vantage point of the Cafe Schneider, nerve centre of Namibian political life

The terrorist season has started again. Sitting here at Schneider's Cafe; late afternoon, late summer sun rimming the umbrellas with light, you can see them wandering round the mall. They're unmistakable. Either wearing crisp khaki from the Sudwest Safari Shop in Hamburg, or casually cutoff jeans bulging over suntanned thighs developed in six months of overland travel through Africa, with a capital A.

Fat Rosie the waitress mutters on under her breath about the '*onbeskofde spul*' from other shores. Grandma clicks a pic of little Wolfgang and little Heidi decapitating their brutchens,

They're here on package tours, maybe to buy a farm or two (cheap at the price, now the drought and the imminence of independence have taken their toll), to take a walk on the wild side, snap a few Agfachromes of Africa. Meanwhile out in Kaiser Street and beyond (just a few metres across the arcade),

there's a revolution going on. Not a very big one by Third World standards, but a revolution none the less. It's a minor irritation to the terrorists in their khaki drag. Two roadblocks on the way to Etosha. Caprivi and the Kavango bush out of bounds because they might get slotted by a landmine or a gook.

Not very old, as revolutions go. Only 17 years. That's not even the legal age of consent, or whatever it is you become at 18. Still, it'll be nice to tell the folks back home in Wurtemberg, Little Thames or Pittsburg how we travelled within 30 kms of the war and all we saw were lions and elephants.

Earlier this month I was up in Damaraland, the one the papers always refer to as 'one of Africa's last great wildlife paradises'. Wonderful. The drought had broken, green fields rolled as far as the eye could see to equally green mountains, and water was everywhere. No people, that's Namibia. Then we came across a roadworks crew. Driving a landmine-proofed roadscraper. A little excessive, seeing as the nearest landmine was probably 200 kms to the north, but it sent a chilly little nasty down my backbone.

Gave me pause for thought. In seventeen years our little revolution has grown somewhat from being a minor irritation on 'the border' where a ragtag bunch of barefoot guerillas used to pot off a few shots now and again from splintered-butt .303s. These days it costs South Africa about R1-million to kill just one of those barefoot guerillas, but, they keep telling us, We – royal plural – are winning the war.

Heaven save us from victory, as the *Sunday Express* remarked in an editorial after Operation Askari. The toll has been heavy. Never mind the casualty figures released in bland, three paragraph messages of regret and condolences from Defence Headquarters in Pretoria; the list of families we all know who have a son in exile because they could not find a valid reason to fight in the war; the 10,000 people, one percent of Namibia's people, who have died in the war so far; the 100,000, ten percent, in exile, or training in camps in Angola, East Germany or the Soviet Union; the lives of 500,000 people, half the population, living in Ovambo and Kavango, under military rule; the endless list of inquest findings handed down by the northern magistrates' courts, the findings are always the same – 'cause of death; person or persons unknown'. (They stopped

saying 'cause of death: Swapo terrorists', when the legal fraternity complained that just because a killer wears camouflage uniform, has a face that looks black at night and carries an AK47, does not mean he is a Swapo guerilla).

That's the stuff that makes the papers, in three-column headlines or tucked away as page three fillers. Nobody really talks about the rest of the casualties, the ones the terrorists in their khaki drill from Moss Brothers never see. The pathetic humans in the south eating cattle fodder because they have no food.

Or the alcoholic mothers and fathers with their glue-sniffing pre-pubescent children who'll be sent onto the streets at puberty, sometimes before, to hustle whites for extra bucks. Because father and mother can't pay rent, because another factory has closed, another farmer gone bust, another shop retrenched as work gets scarcer and scarcer and corruption at every level takes its share of the peoples' money.

Alan Paton could not have hit on a better title for a book than he did with 'Ah, but your land is beautiful.' That is the refrain of the surprised terrorist who come here to 'experience the desert', only to find a country which cannot be beaten for beauty and variety. Except for the ugliness they never see. And which many of the whites living here never see (70-odd thousand of them at last count). Or ignore.

When I lived in South Africa, writing about South African politics, it was easy to talk about Namibia. The issues were so clear, so defined, so cut and dried. It was a fight for independence by Swapo against South Africa. The United Nations interfered from time to time, just to make the whole thing a wee bit more interesting from an academic point of view.

All so easy.

Closer up, the view becomes more hazy, the issues a bit more clouded, the inevitable outcome slightly less inevitable. The issues remain the same, but the ground on which its all being played out has become painfully familiar and painfully filled with despair.

It's late Friday afternoon, and the *Windhoek Observer* has just hit the shelves at Frewer's Stationers. The weekly column by Hannes Smith, journalist extra-

ordinaire, Laurel to Hunter S Thompson's Hardy, is a piece to remember. Smittie's *Observation Post*, written by the *Observer's* court reporter, crime reporter, war correspondent, reporter in chief and editor, talks of suicide and death.

He had a dream the other night, and "the dream compelled me to make a short reference today to four people I personally know who will shoot themselves or gas themselves before the end of 1984".

Matters of love, matters of finance, just plain despair, would drive them to these ends, and when the final shot was fired, wrote Smittie, he would document them in the *Observer*, using the notes he gathered on them in the course of their acquaintance.

It's ugly, but it's part of the tight tension that is Namibia in Autumn 1984. As a youth I once lived through a summer we later spoke of as 'bad craziness'. A fellow survivor of that summer is now in exile, a young South African who had no desire to be part of an army of occupation in a foreign country defending the sanctity of apartheid.

There is bad craziness in the air here right now. Things are in that suspended stage an ugly pimple goes through before it gets a head and pressure from the fingers relieves the pain and begins a healing process.

Politicians are at each other's throats, far more bitterly than normal. Coalitions are disintegrating, people are falling over each other to get onto the star-studded Swapo bandwagon before the flag finally goes down and South Africa pulls back across the Orange River.

Lawsuits and suicides are the order of the day like never before. People keep coming out of detention with scars on their bodies and their minds, scars that weren't there before. Death squads roam the north, taking out anybody who informed for the SADF, who helped Swapo, whose son is in Koevoet, or who looked too long at someone else's girlfriend. Bad craziness. Everyone carries a gun or has access to one. Everyone knows someone who knows someone who is a soldier fighting in the South West Africa Territory Force, Koevoet, or the Peoples' Liberation Army of Namibia. Tales abound of violence, brutality and death. Most of it at the drop of a hat. Detainees allege they are tortured in tiny barbed wire cages in 45 degrees C heat, while bubonic plague runs through the

war zones and their refugee camps like a manic rat.

The SWA Directorate of Trade and Tourism has just opened a new office to help terrorists. It's in the Metropolitan Homes Trust Building, New Street North, Johannesburg. "From one end of this country to the other, surprises abound. For South West Africa is the land of the unexpected. The land of startling contrasts. Nature has contrived to put them all together in a way that makes this country one of the most exciting on the continent, " is the way the ad goes in the *Sunday Times Colour Magazine*.

Just be careful you don't go too far south, where the people eat cattle fodder to survive. Or too far north, where you might find one too many bodies under a bush. Or into Katutura, where you'll stumble over pre-pubescent glue-sniffers, or into Stubel Street, where the teenage pimps hawk their weenage whores.

At Schneider's Cafe, late afternoon, late summer sun rims the terrorists as they sit and leaf idly through their colour brochures, marvelling at how cosmopolitan Windhoek is.

"Such a nice revolution. We weren't scared once."