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**Opening Extract from...**

# Telling Times

Writing and Living

1950 - 2008

Written by Nadine Gordimer

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# The 1950s

## A South African Childhood

### Allusions in a Landscape

Growing up in one part of a vast young country can be very different from growing up in another, and in South Africa this difference is not only a matter of geography. The division of the people into two great races – black and white – and the subdivision of the white into Afrikaans- and English-speaking groups provides a diversity of cultural heritage that can make two South African children seem almost as strange to each other as if they had come from different countries. The fact that their parents, if they are English-speaking, frequently have come from different countries complicates their backgrounds still further. My father came to South Africa from a village in Russia; my mother was born and grew up in London. I remember, when I was about eight years old, going with my sister and mother and father to spend a long weekend with a cousin of my father's who lived in the Orange Free State. After miles and miles of sienna-red ploughed earth, after miles and miles of silk-fringed mealies standing as high as your eyes on either side of the road and ugly farmhouses where women in bunchy cotton dresses and sun-bonnets stared after the car as we passed (years later, when I saw *Oklahoma!* in a Johannesburg theatre, I recalled that scene), we reached the dorp where the cousin lived in a small white house with sides that were dust-stained in a wavering wash, like rust, for more than a foot above the ground. There we two little girls slept on beds of a smothering softness we had never felt before – feather beds brought from Eastern Europe – and drank tea drawn from a charming contraption, a samovar. There – to our and our mother's horror – we were given smoked duck, flavoured with garlic, at breakfast. The two children of the house spoke only Afrikaans,

like the Boer children who played in the yards of the mean little houses on either side, and my sister and I, queasy from the strange food and able to speak only English, watched their games with a mixture of hostility and wistfulness.

How different it all was from our visit to our mother's sister, in Natal! There, with the 'English' side of the family, in the green, softly contoured hills and the gentle meadows of sweet grass near Balgowan, we might almost have been in England itself. There our cousins Roy and Humphrey rode like young lords about their father's beautiful farm, and spoke the high, polite, 'pure' English learned in expensive Natal private schools that were staffed with masters imported from English universities. And how different were both visits from our life in one of the gold-mining towns of the Witwatersrand, near Johannesburg, in the Transvaal.

There are nine of these towns, spread over a distance of roughly a hundred and forty miles east and west of Johannesburg. The one in which we lived was on the east side – the East Rand, it is called – and it had many distinctions, as distinctions are measured in that part of the world. First of all, it was one of the oldest towns, having got itself a gold strike, a general store, a few tents and a name before 1890. In the pioneer days, my father had set himself up in a small, one-man business as a watchmaker and jeweller, and during the twenties and thirties, when the town became the most rapidly expanding on the Witwatersrand, he continued to live there with his family. In the richest gold-mining area in the world, it became the richest square mile or so. All around us, the shafts went down and the gold came up; our horizon was an Egyptian-looking frieze of man-made hills of cyanide sand, called 'dumps', because that is what they are – great mounds of waste matter dumped on the surface of the earth after the gold-bearing ore has been blasted below, hauled up, and pounded and washed into yielding its treasure. In the dusty month before spring – in August, that is – the sand from the dumps blew under the tightly shut doors of every house in the town and enveloped the heads of the dumps themselves in a swirling haze, lending them some of

the dignity of cloud-capped mountains. It is characteristic of the Witwatersrand that any feature of the landscape that strikes the eye always does so because it is a reminder of something else; considered on its own merits, the landscape is utterly without interest – flat, dry, and barren.

In our part of the East Rand, the yellowish-white pattern of the cyanide dumps was broken here and there by the head of a black hill rising out of the veld. These hills were man-made, too, but they did not have the geometrical, pyramidal rigidity of the cyanide dumps, and they were so old that enough real earth had blown on to them to hold a growth of sparse grass and perhaps even a sinewy peppercorn or peach tree, sprung up, no doubt, out of garden refuse abandoned there by somebody from the nearby town. These hills were also dumps, but through their scanty natural covering a blackness clearly showed – even a little blueness, the way black hair shines – for they were coal dumps, made of coal dust.

The coal dumps assumed, both because of their appearance and because of the stories and warnings we heard about them, something of a diabolical nature. In our sedate little colonial tribe, with its ritual tea parties and tennis parties, the coal dump could be said to be our Evil Mountain; I use the singular here because when I think of these dumps, I think of one in particular – the biggest one, the one that stood fifty yards beyond the last row of houses in the town where we lived. I remember it especially well because on the other side of it, hidden by it, was the local nursing home, where, when my sister and I were young and the town was small, all the mothers went to have their babies and all the children went to have their tonsillectomies – where, in fact, almost everyone was born, endured an illness, or died. Our mother had several long stays in the place, over a period of two or three years, and during these stays our grandmother took us on a daily visit across the veld to see her. Immediately lunch was over, she would spend an hour dressing us, and then, brushed and beribboned and curled, we would set off. We took a path that skirted the coal dump, and there it was at our side most of the way – a dirty, scarred old mountain, collapsing into the fold of a small ravine here, supporting a twisted peach

tree there, and showing bald and black through patchy grass. A fence consisting of two threads of barbed wire looped at intervals through low rusted-iron poles, which once had surrounded it completely, now remained only in places, conveying the idea of a taboo rather than providing an effectual means of isolation. The whole coal dump looked dead, forsaken, and harmless enough, but my sister and I walked softly and looked at it out of the corners of our eyes, half fascinated, half afraid, because we knew it was something else – inert. Not dead by any means, but inert. For we had *seen*. Coming back from the nursing home in the early-winter dusk, we had seen the strange glow in the bald patches the grass did not cover, and in the runnels made by the erosion of summer wind and rain we had seen the hot blue waver of flame. The coal dump was alive. Like a beast of prey, it woke to life in the dark.

The matter-of-fact truth was that these coal dumps, relics of the pre-gold-strike era when collieries operated in the district, were burning. Along with the abandoned mine workings underground, they had caught fire at some time or other in their years of disuse, and had continued to burn, night and day, ever since. Neither rain nor time could put the fires out, and in some places, even on the coldest winter days, we would be surprised to feel the veld warm beneath the soles of our shoes, and, if we cut out a clod, faintly steaming. That dump on the outskirts of the town where we lived is still burning today. I have asked people who have studied such things how long it may be expected to go on burning before it consumes itself. Nobody seems to know; it shares with the idea of Hades its heat and vague eternity.

But perhaps its fierce heart is being subdued gradually. Apparently, no one can even remember, these days, the nasty incidents connected with the dump, incidents that were fresh in memory during our childhood. Perhaps there is no need for anyone to remember, for the town now has more vicarious and less dangerous excitements to offer children than the thrill of running quickly across a pile of black dust that may at any moment cave in and plunge the adventurer into a bed of incandescent coals. In our time, we knew a girl to whom this had happened, and our mother

remembered a small boy who had disappeared entirely under a sudden landslide of terrible glowing heat. Not even his bones had been recovered, but the girl we knew survived to become a kind of curiosity about the town. She had been playing on the dump with her friends, and all at once had found herself sunk thigh-deep in living coals and hot ashes. Her friends had managed to pull her out of this fiery quicksand, but she was horribly burned. When we saw her in the street, we used to be unable to keep our eyes from the tight-puckered skin of her calves, and the still tighter skin of her hands, which drew up her fingers like claws. Despite, or because of, these awful warnings, my sister and I longed to run quickly across the lower slopes of the dump for ourselves, and several times managed to elude surveillance long enough to do so. And once, in the unbearable terror and bliss of excitement, we clutched each other on the veld below while, legs pumping wildly, our cousin Roy, come from Natal to spend the holidays with us, rode a bicycle right to the top of the dump and down the other side, triumphant and unharmed.

In the part of South Africa where we lived, we had not only fire under our feet; we had, too, a complication of tunnels as intricate as one of those delicate chunks of worm cast you find on the seashore. All the towns along the Witwatersrand, and the older parts of Johannesburg itself, are undermined. Living there, you think about it as little as you think about the fact that, whatever your work and whatever your life, your reason for performing it where you do and living it where you do is the existence of the gold mines. Yet you are never allowed to forget entirely that the ground is not solid beneath you. In Johannesburg, sitting eight or ten storeys up, in the office of your stockbroker or in your dentist's waiting room, you feel the strong shudder of an earth tremor; the vase of flowers skids towards the magazines on the table, the gossip of the ticker-tape machine is drowned. These tremors, never strong enough to do any serious damage, are commonplace. By ascribing them to the fact that the Witwatersrand is extensively undermined, I am inadvertently taking sides in a long, discreet controversy between the seismologists and the Chamber of Mines. The seismologists say

that the tremors are not, geologically speaking, earth tremors at all but are caused by rocks falling from the ceilings of either working or abandoned mines. The Chamber of Mines insists that they are natural and not man-caused phenomena. And jerry-builders take advantage of the dispute, greeting the evidence of cracked walls in houses with a shrug of the shoulders that lets the responsibility fall on God or the Chamber of Mines, take your choice.

Our life in the mining town, in one of the ugliest parts of a generally beautiful continent, was narrow and neighbourly – a way of life that, while it commonly produces a violent reaction of rebelliousness in adolescence, suits young children very well. The town had sprung into existence because of the mines, had grown up around the mines. The shopkeepers had come – first with their tents, then with their shanties, and, at last, with their corner sites and neon signs – to fill and profit from the miners' needs. At the start, the miners wanted only the necessities of life – stoves and workmen's clothing and meat. Soon they wanted everything – cinemas and shiny wooden cocktail cabinets and tinned asparagus. My father's little business was a good example of how trade grew into the full feather of provincial luxury from scrawny beginnings in utility. When he arrived in the town, just before the Boer War, he used to tramp from mine to mine carrying a cardboard suitcase full of pocket watches. The watches sold for less than a dollar each. They ticked as loudly as the crocodile who pursues Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*, and they were as strong as they sounded. They were a necessity for the mine-workers, who found that ordinary watches became rusted and ruined in no time by the damp and heat underground. So my father, a tiny, dapper, small-featured youth with feet no bigger than a woman's, made his living by selling watches to, and repairing watches for, the great, hefty Afrikaners and the tough Scots and Irishmen who produced gold. He had a little wood-and-iron cottage, where he lived with a black retriever named Springbok, two German roller canaries, and his watchmaker's worktable.

By the time my father married my mother, he was living in the newly built local hotel, owned a horse and trap, and had rented a

glass-fronted shop, where he sold diamond engagement rings. By the time my sister and I were old enough to notice such things, his shop had showcases full of silver sports cups, walnut mantel clocks, stainless-steel cutlery, and costume jewellery from America and Czechoslovakia. A stone-deaf relative had been imported from Leningrad to do the watch repairing; he sat behind an engraved glass partition, out of sight of the customers, who were now townspeople – the families of other shopkeepers, municipal officials, civil servants – as well as white workers from the mines. The white miners wore the new Swiss water-and-shock-proof watches. The only potential customers for cheap pocket watches were now the tribal Africans – migrant labourers who were employed to do all the really hard work in the mines – and these bewildered men, still wearing earrings and dressed in ochre-dyed blankets, mostly made their purchases at government-concession stores on mine property and did not venture into a jeweller's shop in the town.

The mine people and the townspeople did not by any means constitute a homogeneous population; they remained two well-defined groups. Socially, the mine people undoubtedly had the edge on the people of the town. Their social hierarchy had been set up first, and was the more rigid and powerful. There was a general manager before there was a mayor. But even when the town did create civic dignitaries for itself, even when we did get a country club, there were those among us who neither knew nor cared about the social scaffolding that was going up around them, whereas at each mine the G.M. was not only the leader of society but also the boss, and if one did not revere him as the first, one had to respect him as the second. The dignitaries on both sides – the G.M.s and their officials from the mines, and the city fathers, the presidents of clubs in the town, and so on – invited each other to dinners and receptions, and the teams of the sports clubs of mine and town competed with each other, but there was little mixing on the more intimate levels of sociability. The mine officials and their wives and families lived on 'the property'; that is, the area of ground, sometimes very large, that belonged to each mine and that included, in addition to the shaft heads and the mine offices and the hospital, a

sports ground, a swimming pool, a recreation club, and the houses of the officials – all built by the mine. The G.M. lived in the largest house, usually a spacious and very pleasant one, situated in a garden so big that one might almost have called it a park. The garden was kept in full bloom all year round, right through the sharp, dry Transvaal winter, by African labour diverted from the mines, and the liquor stock indoors was ample and lavishly dispensed. The assistant manager's house was smaller, but decent enough; then came the underground manager's, and then the compound manager's (he was in charge of the four-sided barracks, with all its windows opening on a courtyard and only one gateway, always guarded, to the world without, in which the African labourers were fed and housed in celibacy, having left their families in distant kraals), and then the mine secretary's, and so on down the salary and social scale, the houses getting smaller, the gardens getting less elaborate. Most of the mine families lived only a few miles out from the town, but their self-sufficiency surrounded them like a moat. Their offspring could go from the cradle to the grave without having anything to do with the town other than attending its high school, placing weekly orders with the butcher and the grocer, and paying three visits to church – one for christening, one for marrying, one for burying.

We, of course, were town people. All my childhood, we lived in the little house, in one of the town's earliest suburbs, that my parents had bought before I was born. Other people moved to the newer suburbs of flat-roofed villas, pseudo-Tudor houses, and, later, houses inspired by American magazines, with picture windows looking out on the bare veld. But we stayed. Ours was a bungalow-type house with two bow windows and a corrugated-iron roof, like almost all the other houses that were built in the Witwatersrand gold-mining towns during the twenties and early thirties. It stood in a small garden, one of several similar houses on a street along whose sidewalk grew leathery-leaved trees, which in summer put out bunches of creamy, bell-shaped flowers. When my sister and I were little, we used to fit these flowers over our fingertips, like tiny hats; when we were old enough to own bicycles, we would ride up

and down beneath the trees, feeling rather than hearing the swish of their leaves above our heads. The trees were kept clipped in the shape of bullets, in order that they might not interfere with the telephone wires, and so were not beautiful. There was, in fact, no beauty in the whole town. We children simply took it for granted that beauty – hills, trees, buildings of elegance – was not a thing to be expected of ordinary, everyday life.

The town had already grown up and hardened, as it were, into permanent shape before its leaders became sophisticated enough to consider orthodox municipal planning, and so, although it kept expanding in all directions, it remained essentially a one-street affair. As is so often true in such cases, that street was too narrow, and the land on either side of it was too valuable to make widening feasible. The street had the authentic jostle and bustle of a thriving business centre, and we children loved to walk ‘down-town’ on Saturday mornings with our mother. This was as much a social as a shopping expedition. During our early years, the only places of refreshment in the town were two or three hotel bars (in South Africa, closed to women anyway) and the Greek cafés, where black-haired Minos or Mavrodatos sold cigarettes, sweets, polony and fruit, and where one could sit at a table with a flyblown cloth and be served terribly weak tea or coffee adulterated with chicory. But by the middle thirties there were one or two genteel teashops, where the local women met for mid-morning refreshment, and the Greeks had installed shiny soda fountains, which we children used to patronise heavily after Saturday matinées at the local cinema.

Most of the shops were family businesses, but with prosperity came Woolworth’s – from whose gramophone-record counter dated jazz swung out into the main street – and branches of various big department stores in Johannesburg. The owners of the family businesses became the city fathers, and their families became the ‘old families’ of the town. We were one of these ‘old families’ and were known to everyone in the town and even at the mines – there by sight rather than by association. My father took no part in civic affairs and remained what he had always been, a simple man and a shopkeeper, but my mother, a woman of considerable energy and

not much scope, served on endless committees. Some years, she was president of several organisations at once, with a secretaryship or two thrown in as well. She baked cakes and she prepared reports; she was honorary cashier at charity concerts, and she taught first aid to children. Her position was a curious one. Unlike most of the other women, she did not confine herself to the particular section of the community to which she belonged. The fact was that she didn't seem to belong to any particular section. Although my father kept up some sort of token allegiance to the Jewish community, contributing to the upkeep of the ugly little synagogue and even going to pray there once a year, on the Day of Atonement, my mother did not fit in very well with the ladies of the congregation. She got on much better with the Scots ladies of the town, and I remember her working (or, rather, baking) like a beaver for the annual cake-and-sweet sale in aid of the Presbyterian Church.

Our life was very much our mother's life, and so our pleasures, into which we plunged with gusto, knowing no others, were charity bazaars, the local eisteddfods that were held in the town hall by members of the Welsh community, and dancing displays by the pupils of local teachers (my sister and I were often performers), along with – staple stimulation for the entire population – the cinema. In summer, we went to the municipal swimming baths. Walks or rambles about the outskirts of the town were unknown to us, except for those furtive excursions in the direction of the burning dump. There was nothing to see beyond the limits of the suburbs but 'the location' – an urban slum where the African industrial workers and servants were huddled in segregation from their white employers – and a dammed-up pond, created by waste water pumped from one of the mines, in which a yellow cyanide dump was reflected, its image broken by bulrushes and the occasional passage of a small wild duck.

There were junior and senior state schools in the town, where education for white children was free, but my sister and I were sent as day scholars to the local convent; the Dominican nuns had come, like everything else, with the town's prosperity. Many of the townspeople, torn between the businessman's natural suspicion of

getting something for nothing and the fear that their children would be converted to Catholicism (the town was largely Protestant), resolved the issue by sending their children to neither the state school nor the convent but to boarding school in Johannesburg. My mother, a fearless nomad when it came to social and religious barriers, had no such misgivings. My sister and I spent our school life at the convent, and were taught English by a bun-faced nun with a thick German accent. At school, I showed some of my mother's bland disregard for the sheeplike group consciousness of the town, and struck up a long and close friendship with the daughter of an official at one of the oldest and most important mines. So it was that I came to cross the tacit divide between the mines and the town, and to know the habitat, domestic life and protocol of 'the mine people'.

Like middle-class children everywhere who live within reasonable reach of an ocean, we were taken to the sea every year. The hot months of December and January are the popular season for family holidays in South Africa, the Indian Ocean is the nearest ocean for Transvaalers, and Durban – 400 miles from Johannesburg – is the nearest city on the Indian Ocean coast. So almost every summer we spent our three weeks in Durban or in a village on the South Coast, not far from Durban. We could, of course, have gone to Lourenço Marques, the gay little port in Portuguese territory, which is about the same distance from Johannesburg, but we never did, because that was a place to which grown-ups went without their children (and preferably without their wives or husbands) and only in the winter season of July and August. When we were very small, we adored Durban, where we stayed in one of the solid, cool, high-ceilinged hotels along the Marine Parade and, leaning out of the steamy bathroom in the evening, after we had been sent off to bed, could see the coloured lights strung like beads on an abacus from lamp post to lamp post along the sea front while the trams thundered past, and a strange fading and rising cry – a mingling of laughter, squeals, and juke-box and hurdy-gurdy music – rose, between the roaring advance and hissing retreat of the sea, from the amusement park.

When we grew a little older and entered that dreamy, remote, soulful state that comes sometimes in early adolescence, we found the crowded beach, the sand lumpy with popcorn, and the vulgarly lit sea front, where all the wires and cables of an electrically contrived fairyland showed on the lamp posts in the light of day, utterly abhorrent. Nothing would have persuaded us to enter the amusement park, from which wonderful teddy bears and even a felt Mickey Mouse had once come, won by our mother by dint of Heaven knows how many tickets at the sideshows, and placed at the foot of our beds for discovery in the morning. Nothing would have bored us more than the slow, chugging trips around the bay on a pleasure launch named the *Sarie Marais*, which only a few years back had had all the solemn thrill of departure for a new continent. And most of all we revolted against the nagging of the Indian vendors on the beach, with their ‘Mangoes? Litchis? Banana? Very nice p-ruit? Grandaila parfait? Ice cream?’ Gesture one angrily away, and another, sweating, scowling, barefooted on the burning sand but dressed from head to foot in white drill embroidered with some unlikely name – Joe’s Place, or the Top Hat – came at you like a persistent blue-bottle. You must want *something*. ‘No, no, no, no!’ my sister would shout in rage, and the vendor would stare at her, waiting for her to change her mind.

What we wanted at this stage in our lives, and what we usually got, since, like many parents, ours acquired the tastes of their children, being formed rather than forming, was a holiday at a South Coast village beyond the reach of even the little single-track railway. In this village, the hotel was a collection of thatch-roofed rondavels, the water was free of refuse, and the beach – ah, the beach lay gleaming, silent, mile after mile, looping over flower-strewn rocks; there were, indeed, many beaches, and always one where for the whole day there would be no footprints in the sand but my sister’s and mine. In fine weather, the village was, I suppose, a paradise of sorts. In front of the little hotel was the warm, bright sea, and, curving around behind it, hill after hill covered with the improbable green sheen of sugar cane, which, moving in the breeze, softened every contour like some rich pile, or like that

heavy bloom of pollen which makes hazy the inner convolutions of certain flowers. Streams oozed down from the hills and could be discovered by the ear only, since they were completely covered by low, umbrella-shaped trees (these are seen to better advantage on the hills around Durban, where their peculiarly Japanese beauty is unobstructed by undergrowth), latticed and knitted and strung together by a cat's cradle of lianas and creepers. My sister and I would push and slither our way into these dim, secret places, glimpsing, for the instant in which we leaned over, the greenish, startling image of our faces in water that endlessly reflected back to the ferns the Narcissus image of their own fronds.

More cheerfully, in the bush along the road we would sometimes hear that incredibly light-hearted, gossipy chatter which means that monkeys are about. The little Natal coast monkeys are charming creatures, in appearance exactly the sort of monkey toy manufacturers choose; in fact, they are just what one would wish a monkey to be. They bound about in the treetops, nonchalant and excitable at the same time, and unless they are half tame, as they have become around some of the road-houses on the outskirts of Durban, they move off almost too quickly to be clearly seen; you find yourself left standing and gazing at the branches as they swing back into place and listening to the gaiety as it passes out of hearing, and the whole thing has the feeling of a party to which you have not been invited. If the monkeys, like distant relatives who wish to make it clear that there is *no* connection, ignored us, there were creatures who, because their movements were attuned to some other age of slime or rock, could not escape us. On the trailing plants near the rocks, sleepy chameleons stalked shakily, or clung swaying, their eyes closed and their claws, so like minute, cold human hands, holding on for dear life. If they saw you coming for them, they would go off nervously, high-stepping across the sand, but with a kind of hopelessness, as if they knew that all you had to do was lean over and pick them up. And then, unable to bite, scratch, sting, or even to make any protest other than to hiss faintly and hoarsely, they wrapped their little cold hands around your finger like a tired child and went as pale as they could – a lightly spotted creamy

beige that was apparently their idea of approximating the colour of human skin. My sister was particularly fond of these resigned and melancholy creatures. Twice we took one home to the Transvaal with us on the train, and twice we watched and wept in anguish when, after two or three happy months on the house plant in my mother's living room, the poor thing lost first his ability to change colour, fading instead to a more ghostly pallor each day, and then, literally, his grip, so that he kept falling to the floor. The Transvaal winter, even indoors, was too much for chameleons.

In the heavy green water of the lagoon at the South Coast village where we used to stay, there appeared to be no life at all, though some people said that under the rocks at the bottom there were giant crabs. When the weather was bad for a few days, and the combination of the sea's rising and the lagoon's flooding washed away the sandbanks between the lagoon and the sea, the dark river water in the lagoon poured in a deep channel down into the waves, and the waves mounted the river water, frothing over the swirl. Decaying palm leaves, the rotten ropes of broken lianas, and fallen vegetable-ivory fruit, as hard and round as cricket balls, were washed out of the stagnant bed of the lagoon and brushed you weirdly while you swam in the sea. Once, late one afternoon, my mother and I were lying on the sand watching a solitary swimmer who evidently did not mind the dirty sea. Suddenly we saw the rhythmic flaying of his arms against the water violently interrupted, and then he heaved clear up into the air, gripping or in the grip of a black shape as big as he was. My mother was convinced that he had been attacked by a shark, and went stumbling and flying over the sand to get help from the hotel. I went, with that instinct to seek human solidarity in the face of any sort of danger towards humankind, to stand with some excited children who had been playing with toy boats at the water's edge. I was four or five years older than the eldest of them, and I kept holding them back from the water with the barrier of my outspread arms, like a policeman at a parade. What danger I thought there could be in two or three inches of water I cannot imagine, but the idea that there was a monster in the vicinity seemed to make even the touch of the water's edge a touch of menace.

In minutes, the whole village was on the beach, and out there, but coming nearer with every wave, were the swimmer and the dark shape, now together, now apart, now lost, now discovered again. As the lifesaving rope was unreeled and the volunteer lifesavers plunged into the sea, supposition was shrill, but hastily silenced at the occasional cry of 'Look, there he is!' There was a feeling of special horror, oddly, because it was obvious that the creature was not a shark; with a shark, one knew exactly what it was one had to be afraid of. And then the cry went up: 'It's a crocodile! It's a crocodile!' Even the lifesavers heard it, and looked back towards the shore, confused. Before they could get to the swimmer, he was in water shallow enough for him to stand, and we could see him very clearly, his face grim and wild with water and effort, his hands locked around the long snout of a big reptile, which seemed to gather up the rest of its body in an attempt to kick him, rather than to thrash at him with its tail, as crocodiles are said to do. 'A crocodile!' the cry went up again. 'Enormous!' Men rushed into the shallow water with pocketknives and weapons of driftwood. Yet the man staggered up on to the beach with his monster alone. He was a short, stocky man, and it was true that the thing was as big as he was. It seemed stunned, and he kept hitting it across the snout with his fist, as if to say, 'That will show you!' Amid the screams and the squeals, and the confusion of lifesavers, rope, brandished driftwood, and Boy Scout knives, he beat it to death himself; it was plain that, exhausted though he was, he wanted the privilege of being the conqueror. Then he sat on the sand, sniffing deeply, his chest heaving, a flask of brandy trembling in his hand; I remember so well how he said, in an incredulous, rasping voice, 'Crocodile that size could've torn one of those kids in half.'

The man was a great hero for half an hour. Then an old retired major who had lived in the district for many years and was a botanist and naturalist came over the sand, leaning on his little cane, and prodded at the monster lying there disfigured by blows and sand. 'Leguan,' the major said. 'Old leguan – poor old lizard wouldn't harm a fly. Must've been trying to get back to the lagoon.' The major was quite right. The beast was not a crocodile but one

of those giant lizards, the leguans, that are still fairly common all over South Africa but are careful to keep out of the way of man – as timid and, indeed, except for their frightening size and resemblance to the crocodile family, as defenceless as the chameleon. He would not have bitten the swimmer, and he was too stupid and clumsy even to use his weight to defend himself. The man had done battle with the most reluctant of dragons. So, with the wiliness of human beings, who hate to admit that they have been taken in and must turn their gullibility to advantage somehow, the people in the village and at the hotel were quick to make a kind of joke of the swimmer; where before his words ‘Could’ve torn one of those kids in half’ had made him seem the saviour of their children, now they saw something absurd in the dramatic way he had struggled to bring the creature in instead of making for the shore and his own safety. He went about the hotel for the rest of his holiday very much alone, and a little sullen perhaps.

By the time my sister and I were in our middle teens, we had lost our taste for solitude and the gentle wilderness. Our childhood love of Durban returned – for different reasons, of course – and I think that then we came to love the place for what it really is: in many ways a fascinating city, even if rather dull and smug intellectually. One of our chief delights at this time was our discovery of the Indian quarter of the town, and the Indian market. We enjoyed turning away from the pseudo-American and neo-Tudor architecture of the shopping centre and wandering down wide Grey Street, where the shops were small and crowded together and the balconies picked out in gaudy curlicues, and here and there a silver minaret or cupola shone. Among the more conventional stores, which sold men’s outfitting in fierce competition, were shops full of gauzy, tinselled lengths for saris, and Indian jewellers whose crammed windows seemed almost to tinkle with rows and rows of long gold earrings, and pendants strung upon thread. Those shops that were especially designed to entice European visitors like ourselves burned incense. Their dry, sweet odour was pleasant after the hot street, where splashes of chewed betel nut looked like blood on the

pavement. In the Indian market there were piles of sweetmeats coloured violent pink and putrescent yellow, which smelled as revolting as they looked. We would return from these small expeditions with a particular type of sandal, thonged over the big toe, or a pair of earrings that looked as if they had been stamped out of thin gold tinfoil and that hung from the lobe to the shoulder. The sandals were called, if I remember rightly, *chappals*, and I know they were imported from India, but I do not remember ever seeing an Indian woman in Durban wear them. The earrings, without the folds of a sari to back them up, looked cheap and foolish in Western ears.

Like most South Africans, once I had been to Cape Town I wondered how I had ever thought Durban beautiful. Before I was quite grown up, I went alone with my father to Cape Town and we took a cable car to the top of Table Mountain. We stood there, on a clear, calm, perfect day, and, truly, for a little girl, that was god's-eye look at the world. On such a day, you can see the whole Cape Peninsula, from Fishhoek on the one side, right around the ribs of mountain rising out of the sea, to Camps Bay on the other side. Some people even claim that you are looking at two oceans – the Atlantic on one side and the Indian on the other. But that is in dispute, for it is difficult to say where one ocean begins and the other ends. Anyway, the vast waters that lie before you are enough for two oceans. No peacock's tail ever showed such blues and greens as the seas do from that height; all the gradations of depth are miraculously revealed, and, looking far, far down, where the colour crinkles and breaks into white near the shore, you see pale translucent areas in which the rocks show as boldly as if you were looking through the glass bottom of a boat directly above them.

It is something splendid, an almost superhuman experience, to see the tip of a continent, alive, at your feet. I know that I stumbled back to the cable station that day smiling constantly at my father but with the feeling of tears behind my eyes, in a confused state of exaltation that made it impossible for me to speak, and because I was so young, I immediately lost my exaltation in anger

when I saw that many people who had come up with us on the cable car had been spending their half hour before the cable took us all down again writing postcards that would bear the postmark 'Table Mountain'. These absorbed visitors scarcely glanced out of the windows at what they had come to see.

For some reason, our family did not visit the Kruger National Park until I was sixteen and in my last year at high school. Just how unusual this abstinence is, is difficult to explain to anyone who is not South African. For whatever else the South African in general, and the Transvaaler in particular, may or may not do for his family, he will manage somehow to get them to Kruger Park, the great wildlife preserve in the Transvaal. If he has no car, he will borrow one, and if he cannot do this, he will persuade a friend that two families can travel as uncomfortably as one, and beg a lift. The Park opens at the beginning of winter, in late April or early May, and by dawn on the opening day, cars and trucks loaded with camping equipment and tinned food are lined up in mile-long queues outside the various camps that serve as points of entry to the preserve.

I had heard so many tales and seen so many home movies about the Kruger Park ('My dear, and then the lioness walked right up to the car and sniffed the tyres!') that I almost dreaded going. I regarded listlessly the prospect of overcrowded camps, *boerewors* (a coarse, highly seasoned sausage held in sentimental regard by both Afrikaans- and English-speaking South Africans) cooked over an open fire, and long processions of cars crawling along the dusty roads in the stern rivalry of who would sight the most lions soonest. But when we went, it was very different from that. We went in October, during the last few days before the park closes for the summer rains and the calm that is granted the beasts for their breeding season. We stayed at a camp with a beautiful name – Shingwedsi – and we had the shade of its trees and the red blossoms of the cacti almost to ourselves. The peace of the bushveld was scarcely disturbed by the few cars on the roads.

The rainy season was a month off, but the first night we were at Shingwedsi the fantastic roar of a freak storm woke us at midnight

and flooded the camp, marooning us for nearly twenty-four hours. During the next day, while we were shut in by drumming rain, my Uncle Robert, our mother's younger brother, drank beer with and received the confidences of an engineer who lived and worked in the Park all the year round, watching over the boreholes that guarantee the animals' water supply. At that period, I had just begun to read Hemingway, and it seemed to me that for the first time in my life something in fact had measured up to fiction. The engineer was just such a man as poor Francis Macomber might have chosen as an escort on a hunting trip. (And, on reflection, just such a man as Mrs Macomber might have wished him to choose.) He had a taciturn, world-weary air, and, in the cosy confinement of the rain, over the beer, he made Robert (since he was only ten years older than I, we girls did not call Robert 'uncle') feel that he, Robert, was the first person in years to whom he had been able to talk as he was talking, the first man whose sporting sense and sensitivity matched the engineer's own, a man – at last! at last! – who instinctively would understand the boredom and tameness, for a man of spirit, of life in a sanctuary, with no one to talk to but gaping tourists. In fact, the engineer was one of those people who make others feel chosen. At five in the afternoon, when the rain had stopped, he stood up, flexed his tanned, muscular knees, and said, with a kind of stern, sardonic glee, 'This is the time for elephant, if you want elephant. This water'll keep the wardens out of my way for a day or so.'

Robert and I were agog, as we were meant to be. While Robert questioned him, unconsciously adopting the engineer's terse manner as he tried to show that he 'belonged', I kept close by his side, determined not to be left out of this. The way to see elephants, to get right up close to them and just about feel them breathe on you as you photographed them, said the engineer, was to take a light truck and go after them fast, ignoring the strict twenty-five-mile-an-hour speed limit in force in the preserve, and then, when you sighted them, to get out and stalk them on foot, ignoring the still stricter rule that no visitor may leave his car. Robert and I grinned with excitement. 'But you can only do it when those

bastards are sitting with their feet in mustard water,' said the engineer, referring to the wardens. Well, that was now.

Robert and I slipped away from the rest of the family – I was extremely anxious to have this adventure exclusive of my sister – and in half an hour the engineer had Robert, me, and Robert's movie camera in his truck. While the wild passage of the truck through water and mud shook loose every nerve in our bodies, he told us that what we were going to do was perfectly safe, and then, almost in the same breath, that what we were going to do was terribly dangerous but that we need not worry, for he knew exactly how to do it and get away with it. I wanted to close my eyes with the speed and exhilaration, but the leaps of a herd of impala deer that we had startled into a Nijinsky-like retreat of alarmed grace brought me out of my tense passivity almost as abruptly as the deer had been brought out of theirs. After about twenty minutes, we reached a river bed, and there, with their great columns of legs in the newly flowing water, stood three magnificent elephants.

The shattering life of the truck came to an abrupt halt. The engineer said 'There you are!', and sent Robert and me stalking on foot. It seemed as if our hush of intensity had brought home to the engineer his boredom with this sort of adventure; he looked around for a dry boulder where he could sit and smoke his pipe while he waited. The truck was, I suppose, about two hundred yards from the river. When Robert and I were very near indeed to the elephants, and the beetle-wing whir of the camera was sounding, one of the great beasts slowly swung his head erect and towards us. Then he walked out of the shallow water, trailing his huge feet like a clumsy child, and advanced to within thirty feet of the camera, Robert, and me. And there the elephant stood, slowly flapping those wide, palmetto-like ears that African elephants have. I don't think he seemed real to us; we thought only of the camera, and saw the elephant as he would loom on the screen rather than as he was, a slack-skinned splendid hulk, standing there before us. Then, all in the same instant, I smelled liquorice tobacco and felt myself violently grasped by the arm. The same thing must have happened

to Robert, for at once we were jerked furiously around, met the impatient and alarmed face of the engineer, and were running, pushed roughly along by him, for the truck. I suppose it was the beating of my own heart that I thought was the pounding of the elephant coming up behind us.

Driving back to Shingwedsi camp, the engineer grinned fascinatingly – it was difficult to say who was more under the spell of that grin, Robert or me – and remarked, ‘Those pictures will be quite good enough as it is. You don’t want to scare your friends, do you?’ And Robert and I laughed, to show that we, too, knew there hadn’t really been any danger. It was only next day, when our party had moved on to Pretorius Kop camp to see lions, that I suddenly remembered that the engineer hadn’t had to start the truck when we jumped in; he had left the engine running all the time. Some years later, I was told that there is reason to believe that when an elephant flaps his ears, he does it to fan the scent of his enemy more strongly towards his nostrils, in preparation for a charge.

In a country where people of a colour different from your own are neither in the majority nor the ruling class, you may avoid altogether certain complications that might otherwise arise in the formation of your sense of human values. If the Chinese, say, remain a small, exiled community in Chinatown, and the Red Indians are self-contained on their reservation, you can grow up to have a reasonable standard of personal ethics without taking consideration of their presence. The problem of how you would behave towards them if you met them can be almost purely academic; you need not meet them, if you don’t wish to. In South Africa, this is not possible. There are people who try it, who arrange their lives for it, but they never succeed, for it cannot be done. Even if you are the most diehard reactionary, you cannot get away with it in a country where there are three million white people and nine million black and coloured.

For me, one of the confusing things about growing up in South Africa was the strange shift – every year or two when I was small,

and then weekly, daily almost, when I was adolescent – in my consciousness of, and attitude towards, the Africans around me. I became aware of them incredibly slowly, it now seems, as if with some faculty that should naturally, the way the ability to focus and to recognise voices comes to a baby in a matter of weeks after birth, have been part of my human equipment from the beginning. The experience of the warm black bosom of the mammy (in South Africa she would be known as the nanny) has been so sentimentalised that I must say I am glad it is one I missed, though not for the reason that I missed it. The reason was simply that my mother, like many good South African mothers from England and Europe, would not have dreamed of allowing any child of hers to nestle in the bosom of a dirty native girl. (That was exactly the phrase – a phrase of scornful reflection on those mothers who did.) And if, at the age of five or six, it had been suggested to my sister or me that we should go up and give our native servant a hug, we would have shrunk away. We accepted the fact that natives were not as clean as we were in the same way we accepted the fact that our spaniel had fleas. It was not until years later that it occurred to me that if our servants were not so well and frequently bathed as ourselves, the circumstance that no bathroom or shower was provided for them might have had a great deal to do with it. And it was later even than that when the final breaking down of this preconceived notion came about. I was a long time learning, and each stage of enlightenment brought its own impulse of guilt for the ignorance that had gone before.

Our successive attitudes towards the Indians are another example of the disturbing shift in values that is likely to beset any child growing up in South Africa. The Indians are a minority group here, but even before their treatment became an issue at the United Nations, affecting the attitude of the rest of the world towards South Africa, they could not comfortably be ignored, because they belonged to the great mass of the Other Side – the coloureds. The Indians were imported into the country as indentured labour for the Natal sugar-cane fields in the mid-nineteenth century, and now, except for a considerable number of businessmen in Natal,

a few traders in nearly every Transvaal town, and the considerable number who are employed in hotels and restaurants, they seem to be occupied chiefly as vendors of fruit, vegetables and flowers. In our East Rand mining town, the Indian traders were concentrated in a huddle of shops in one block, bought by them before the passage of what is known as the Ghetto Act of 1946, which, in effect, bars them from owning or leasing property in any but restricted, non-European areas. These were tailor shops, or they were 'bazaars' where cheap goods of all kinds were sold, and they were the object of dislike and enmity on the part of the white shopkeepers. In fact, a woman who was seen coming out of an Indian bazaar with a basket of groceries immediately earned herself a stigma: either she was low-class or, if her husband's position as an official of one of the gold mines put the level of her class beyond question, she must be stingy. 'She's so mean she even goes to the Indians' was the most convincing allegation of miserliness in our town. It was bad enough to be penny-pinching, but to stoop so low as to buy from an Indian trader in order to save!

For some reason I have never understood, it was quite respectable and conventional to buy your fruit and vegetables from the Indians who hawked from door to door with their big red or yellow lorries. Our household, like most others, had its own regular hawker, who called two or three times a week. Whatever a hawker's name (and it was always painted in large, elaborate lettering, a kind of fancy compromise between Indian and English script, on his lorry), he was invariably known as Sammy. He even called himself Sammy, rapping at kitchen doors and announcing himself by this generic. There was a verse, parodying the hawkers' broken English, that children used to chant around these lorries:

Sammy, Sammy, what you got?

Missus, Missus, apricot.

There were many more verses with the same rhyme scheme, becoming more and more daring in their inclusion of what struck the children as giggle-producing obscenities, such as 'chamber

pot', and a few genuine old Anglo-Saxon shockers, which they pronounced quite calmly.

If you did not serenade the Indian with rude songs, and your mother was a good buyer and payer, he might hand you down a peach or a bunch of grapes from his lorry, but if you were an urchin without family backing, he would shout and shoo you away, lest your quick hand filch something while his back was turned. It is interesting to me now, too, to remember how yet again the boggy of uncleanness came up immediately with the gift of the peach from Sammy; my mother, too polite to offend him by saying anything, pronounced such a warning with her eyes that I would not dare put my teeth to that peach until I had taken it inside to be washed. Sammy had 'handled' it. Sammy was an Indian. In fact, Sammy was Not White. Heaven knows, I don't suppose the man *was* clean. But why did no one ever explain that the colour had nothing to do with cleanliness?

So my sister and I began by thinking of the Indian as dirty, and a pest; the vendors whom I have described as annoying us on the beach at Durban were the prototype. Then we thought of him as romantic; our wanderings in the Indian market in Durban were, I suppose, part of a common youthful longing for the exotic. And finally, when we were old enough and clearheaded enough and had read enough to have an abstract, objective notion of man, as well as a lot of jumbled personal emotions about him, the Indian became a person like ourselves.

I suppose it is a pity that as children we did not know what people like to talk of as 'the real Africa' – the Africa of proud black warriors and great jungle rivers and enormous silent nights, that anachronism of a country belonging to its own birds and beasts and savages which rouses such nostalgia in the citified, neighbour-jostled heart, and out of which a mystique has been created by writers and film directors. The fact of the matter is that this noble paradise of 'the real Africa' is, as far as the Union of South Africa is concerned, an anachronism. Bits of it continue to exist; if you live in Johannesburg, you can still go to the bushveld for solitude or shooting in a few hours. And bits of it have been

carefully preserved, with as little of the taint of civilisation as is commensurate with the longing of the civilised for comfort, as in the Kruger Park. But the *real* South Africa was then, and is now, to be found in Johannesburg and in the brash, thriving towns of the Witwatersrand. Everything that is happening on the whole emergent continent can be found in microcosm here. Here are the Africans, in all the stages of an industrial and social revolution – the half-naked man fresh from the kraal, clutching his blanket as he stares gazelle-eyed at the traffic; the detribalised worker, living in a limbo between his discarded tribal mores and the mores of the white man's world; the unhappy black intellectual with no outlet for his talents. And here, too, are the whites, in all the stages of understanding and misunderstanding of this inevitable historical process – some afraid and resentful, some pretending it is not happening, a few trying to help it along less painfully. A sad, confusing part of the world to grow up and live in. And yet exciting.