INTRODUCTION: FAULT LINES

August 1984
Crossing Zimbabwe and Botswana
Zimbabwe Railways

The train rolls slowly across the African veld. Outside my window, the dry, brown earth of southern Africa stretches for miles. The barren landscape is occasionally interrupted by green oases that teem with life. When the train stops at dusty railside villages, children with broad smiles run up alongside my steel carriage, screaming gaily and asking anyone who will make eye contact with them for candy or money. Hawkers shouldering a load of cooked mealie (corn) or bags of potato chips walk the length of the train shouting their menu of offerings. The locomotive abruptly lurches forward and signs of humanity vanish into the afternoon light—until the next stop, when this ritual is repeated all over again. In the most desolate stretches of the journey, I am amazed that this landscape can even support life. Harshness and vitality—it is the first paradox that I encounter here on the southern tip of Africa.

I am wedged into a small compartment of an old Zimbabwe Railways coach with five other travelers. The trappings of a vanquished colonial past surround us. The wood-paneled train compartment is ornately inscribed "RR"—Rhodesia Railways. This old railroad began as a gleam in the eye of Cecil Rhodes, Africa's consummate colonialist. It was to be a vital link in his audacious dream of establishing the reign of the British Empire from Cape to Cairo. But things didn't turn out quite the way he had planned back in 1890. In the first case, Rhodes's rail line only got as far as Tanganyika (now Tanzania) before another colonial power—Germany—blocked his passage.

Rhodes's fantasy started to unravel in more dramatic fashion in the 1960s. Blacks were chafing under the rule of the white minority in both

South Africa and Rhodesia. Tremors of resistance rumbled in both countries. Orderly opposition had exploded into open warfare in Rhodesia by the late sixties, where the population of one hundred thousand whites—a mere 1 percent of the population—suddenly found itself in the crossfire of angry guerrillas. By 1980, the numerical mismatch in this anachronistic outpost of empire resulted in an inevitable victory for the black majority. At midnight on April 17, 1980, as Bob Marley enthralled tens of thousands of citizens and dignitaries in Salisbury's Rufaro Stadium, Zimbabwe was born.[1] Black South Africans celebrated the victory in the townships, assuming that their northern neighbor's triumph signaled the imminent demise of white minority rule throughout southern Africa. Little could these South Africans know that it would take fourteen more tortuous years before this hope was realized.

Night falls on my bustling compartment as the train crosses the border from Zimbabwe into Botswana, heading south toward its final destination in Johannesburg, some thirty hours away. Tiny particles of coal belch forth from the old locomotive, coating everything and everyone. The sooty taste lingers on my tongue. For the four African men facing me, South Africa is a place that is at once a land of promise and anguish. They go there because they must: South Africa is the richest country on the continent. They come to make money there, send it home to their families, and then leave, hopefully with their bodies and souls intact.

For me, the journey into South Africa is for less certain reasons. My interest in South Africa began with a chance encounter: on my first day as a college student in 1978, a protester greeted me as I was en route to the customary freshman "tea" with Harvard University President Derek Bok.

"Do you know that Harvard supports apartheid?" the shaggy young man asked me, pressing a leaflet into my hands. I did not, I replied, but I was sufficiently curious (and brazen) to raise the question with Bok. Certainly an institution such as Harvard that was dedicated to fostering enlightened moral values would not go around with as unseemly an ally as South Africa.

When I asked Bok whether it was true that Harvard had some $350 million in stocks invested in companies that did business with South Africa, his polite smile grew taut on his jowl. He replied that institutions such as Harvard needed to remain "engaged," maintain "dialogue," and bring pressure on South Africa from the inside.

I was unimpressed. Two years after the Soweto riots, the white regime that I read about appeared to be utterly unmoved by polite "pressure" and the occasional diplomatic scolding. The simple reality was that the college president, like so many western leaders, could not bring himself to part with such profitable investments. My anti-apartheid activism began that day.

Why care about a rogue nation ten thousand miles away? In the pedantic world of university life, apartheid leapt out at me as an unambiguous moral affront. It was, in some sense, a relief to come upon a political system for which I could not fathom any credible defense. Undoubtedly it was also easier to deal with distant racial conflicts rather than those in my backyard. My school's complicity in supporting South Africa had transformed apartheid into a local issue for me. I became deeply involved in the college divestment movement; after university, I was active in a variety of local and national campaigns to isolate and pressure South Africa.

Six years after my exchange with Bok, I decided to see for myself what the apartheid of my protest chants was all about. Working as a fledgling freelance journalist, I was joined by my girlfriend (now wife) and fellow activist, Sue Minter, on a journey to the southern tip of Africa.

The men in my compartment are a convivial bunch. I am riding third class, the no-frills conveyance once reserved exclusively for blacks, now still segregated de facto by the logic of economics. Within hours of our meeting, we are involved in a rip-roaring game of poker, and libations flow freely. Among the group is Philip, a Zimbabwean schoolteacher who regales us into the night with stories from the *chimurenga,* the Zimbabwean liberation war.

"Now we ah *free!*" he declares proudly, his sweat-glazed face breaking into a broad grin. "Zimbabwe today, South Africa tomorrow!" he shouts, lubricated by the bottle of *chibuku* (homemade Zimbabwean beer) that is circulating among us. The other men in the compartment, an assortment of Zimbabweans and Botswanans, roar their approval.

The triumphant slogan has a nice ring to it. It seems so sensible, even too obvious to be revolutionary. How much longer can the apartheid regime hold out against the inevitable outcome that sheer numbers (whites constitute one-eighth of the population), to say nothing of justice, would dictate?

Hours later, conductors scurrying along the narrow corridors of the

train awaken us from a fitful slumber. "Passports! Border control!" they bark. As the train slows down, the upbeat mood of my compartment ebbs away. Philip gazes blankly out the window, wondering what to expect in the South Africa he has heard so much about. I too stare and wonder. Our silent musings are answered abruptly as the train stops.

The tricolor flag of South Africa hangs limply from a pole standing forlornly in the still veld. The Ramatlhabama border post separating Botswana from South Africa demarcates a line in the sand. There is a loud rap on the compartment door. It slides open to reveal a tall, trim white man neatly packaged in a steel blue uniform. A thin leather strap arcs across his chest, ending at his revolver. His presentation is crowned by a crisp policeman's hat. The cop is momentarily nonplussed as he surveys the multicolored gaggle of passengers before him. "Off the train, passports out," he finally snaps.

We step outside and are immediately separated by a swarm of other officers. The Africans are herded over to a long queue behind a high barbed wire fence. Sue and I are politely directed to the other side of a fence and to a window with no lines. The sign over our window declares *SLEGS BLANKES*—EUROPEANS ONLY. After checking to make sure our names are not on a "prohibited entrants" list, our passports are stamped and we turn to get back on the train. A conductor blocks our entrance to the third-class compartment where we had been riding.

"You'll be riding in first class now," he insists. I knew this was coming, but I resent it nonetheless. I protest that I would rather sit with my friends. He places his arm squarely across the train door. "In South Africa, you must ride first class," he informs me brusquely. Then his voice softens, "It's much nicer up there anyway—you'll like it."

Arguing is pointless. Sue and I are nervous enough about whether we will encounter trouble at the border—who knows what the omniscient South African security police know about us? Just minutes inside the country, we are already in the thrall of police-state paranoia. We have traveled far to see apartheid firsthand; our introduction does not disappoint. We hustle up to a sterile compartment with fresh bedding and our own private sink. The rich wood trim, royal blue carpet, and pressed linen lend our new accommodations a faintly imperial air.

Outside the window, we can see Philip and our other companions still jostling for attention in the large penned-in area. The black men are

milling around a white man who is processing their papers to be migrant workers in the gold mines. Philip steals a tense glance in our direction. My sullen, guilty gaze from the comfort of my spotless cabin is broken by a man dressed in a neatly pressed white uniform who knocks on our train compartment.

"Would you like tea, sir?" he queries politely.

February 1997
Trans Karoo
South African Railways

The train rolls along the steel spine of South Africa midway through the twenty-seven-hour journey from Johannesburg to Cape Town. Puffy cumulus clouds glow pink in the afternoon light. Cattle occasionally interrupt the otherwise desolate expanse of the Karoo, the barren desert center of the country. The land glows a warm gold in the waning hours of the day. The vista I peer out on somehow seems friendlier, softer than it did on my first journey here thirteen years earlier. Perhaps it is just that I no longer feel the fear and loathing that were undercurrents on all my previous travels.

It has been three years since black majority rule came to South Africa. On a stunning May day in 1994, Nelson R. Mandela stood framed by the Roman columns of the Union Buildings in Pretoria and took the oath of office as South Africa's first democratically elected president. The moving event was witnessed by forty-five heads of state and was capped by a flyover from the South African Air Force—once a hated symbol of apartheid's global reach—trailing the colors of the new South African flag.

South Africa after apartheid feels like it has breathed a collective sigh of relief. Gone is the reflexively defensive posture of whites and the head-hanging glumness of blacks. Blacks are finally free to enjoy the mundane privileges of normal life: going about daily tasks unmolested, sitting where they like, and for the lucky few, acquiring a bit of wealth.

My train ride presents a microcosm of these changes. The second- and first-class carriages are integrated, but individual compartments are not. This unofficial segregation is courtesy of the white civil servants who remain in their jobs on the railways. The new South Africa is still run by the old white bureaucracy; it is one of the contradictions that appear everywhere

in the country. South African Railways was notorious as an employment agency for poor Afrikaners. These workers, like other white civil servants, were guaranteed their jobs—it was a sop thrown to the National Party in the pre-election negotiations. When I asked the ticket salesman about seating in third class, he appeared pained. "Look," he said with circumspection, "there is a lot of drinking there. You'll be more comfortable in second class." He rang up a second-class ticket without further discussion.

I head to the dining car for dinner. The chief steward, Pieter Jordaan, greets me at my table. The Afrikaner has spent twenty-seven years working on the trains. He is dressed smartly in a white dinner jacket, roving the aisles of the old train, and checking on each diner. An obsequious smile is pasted on his face. I hail him down to chat. After some banter about food and wine, I get to my point. "Have the trains changed much since 1994?" I ask.

He continues beaming his saccharine smile. "In the past, other Africans didn't ride with us," he replies. "Now, with bus prices too high, they are coming back to us." I feign ignorance and ask him if the trains were once segregated. His head cocks to the side, as if he is shocked by my question.

"In the past, anyone could ride first class," he insists. "If you got the money, why not?" He is still smiling as he spins this yarn about the utter normalcy of South Africa. But I know that he is lying.

Back in my train compartment, I strike up a conversation with the assistant train manager, an older African man named Alfred (he declines to tell me his surname out of fear of "getting in trouble"). I ask him whether trains were segregated. He looks surprised by the naiveté of the query.

"Of course," he replies, adding that blacks were only allowed to ride first class in 1993. I tell him how the chief steward insisted to me that there was no segregation. He cracks a bitter half-smile and shakes his head in disbelief.

"I've worked on the trains for thirty-four years. But I couldn't check tickets or deal with white passengers on the mainline [intercity] trains."

"Racism," Alfred assures me, "is alive and well in the new South Africa."

In the years since the end of white minority rule in South Africa, everything has changed, and nothing has changed. South Africa remains one of the world's most schizophrenic places. It is a land of wrenching contrast: the make-believe manicured world of white South Africans continues to prosper alongside the gritty poverty of the black majority. And so Pieter Jordaan assures me cheerily that all is well in South Africa and always has been, while his black colleague Alfred speaks of dignity denied—still.

The great divide that was a hallmark of apartheid South Africa remains firmly in place. It's just more confusing now, as disparate images crowd onto the same screen. Symbols of enormous change—embodied by an all-forgiving prisoner-cum-president—exist alongside signs of no change, evidenced by the oceans of impoverished squatter communities. The juxtaposition can be utterly disorienting. As I traveled throughout South Africa in 1996 and 1997, I would careen alternately from feeling that South Africa had been miraculously saved, to fearing that it was on the brink of disaster.

South Africa is in the throes of reinventing itself. Out of a society based on division, greed, and bigotry, a new "rainbow nation" is struggling to be born. But years of apartheid have left the architects of this nonracial society-to-be bereft of navigational aids. The tension between an old order that refuses to die and a new order that has not yet taken root is excruciating. It is a transitional period that is at once baffling, frightening, exhilarating, and depressing.

"Why have you come to *South Africa?*" whites would routinely ask me during the year that I lived there. The question was posed with a tone of embarrassment, as if I'd disembarked from the plane here by accident, or had unsuspectingly stumbled upon a nation of naked people. My answer always astonished them: "Because you live in the most exciting country in the world."

That has always been my feeling about South Africa. Compared with the granitic political stability of the United States, South Africa is an incredibly dynamic landscape. Even in the darkest days of apartheid, I drew inspiration from those who insisted that they would defeat the seemingly overwhelming forces of the state and create a new democratic society. It was an outlandish pipe dream that I privately thought was unattainable. And then it came true.

What has repeatedly drawn me back to South Africa is an intensity that is unmatched by any other place that I have traveled, from Asia to Africa to North America. The conflicts, dramas, and resolutions seem larger than life. Everything about the place is cast in extreme hues: the warmth of the welcome, the driving beat of the *kwela* music, the stubbornness of the Afrikaner farmers, the commitment of township youths, the depth of emotions about the land. The intensity is both exhilarating and exhausting.

South Africa continues to act out its dramas in bold strokes even though world attention has shifted to other hot spots. Throughout 1995 and 1996,

the entire country participated in a yearlong effort to write a new constitution. The result is a 180-page document that includes South Africa's first bill of rights and is hailed as one of the most inclusive, democratic bodies of law in the world.[2] It was published in eleven languages and proudly distributed throughout the country in March 1997. On a local level, whole bureaucracies are being wiped away and new ones put in place. In the Cape Town metropolitan area, home to three million people, the thirty-nine former municipalities (including separate town councils for each racial group) were collapsed into one new metropolitan council and six local councils in 1996. It is a time when everything seems up for grabs.

There is also a downside to this upheaval. Criminals are among the opportunists who have taken advantage of the changes. South Africa now has the dubious distinction of being the most murderous society on earth.[3] Violent crime is not new to South Africa—black townships have always been plagued by it—but it is relatively new to white South Africans. Despite the fact that blacks are twenty times more likely to be murdered than whites, the crime wave (which officials say has been declining since 1997) has left whites utterly demoralized and paranoid.[4] For their part, criminals have been emboldened by the new social freedoms. Car-jacking—assaulting drivers and stealing their vehicles—is now so commonplace that drivers in Johannesburg refuse to stop at red lights out of fear of attack. Ironically, some of the crime is attributed to the former township activists known as "comrades" who are now unemployed, angry, and disillusioned. They have been dubbed *comtsotsis* in the new parlance—a hybrid of "comrade" and *tsotsi* (thug). As for solving the crime problem, it doesn't help that South Africa's vaunted police force, so ruthless when it came to wiping out dissent, has proven to be inept at basic policing.

Such is the topsy-turvy nature of a society that has been turned on its head. The tumult prompted one South African journalist to reply glumly to my praise of his country's dynamism, "But I don't want to live in an *exciting* country. I want to live in a nice *boring* country like yours."

I had not intended to come to South Africa in 1984. The apartheid state was taboo, especially among foreigners active in anti-apartheid politics. I planned instead to visit Zimbabwe. My girlfriend Sue and I hoped to see what a "post-revolutionary" country looked and felt like, not a country locked in a time warp of racist oppression. I mentioned my travel plans

to Themba Vilakazi, a friend who was then director of the Boston-based Fund for a Free South Africa and a longtime member of the African National Congress (ANC). An exiled South African, Themba was an impassioned public speaker who inspired me and many others to action; his good-humored counsel in the face of adversity kept us going.

"You should go to South Africa if you can get in," Themba insisted, to my surprise. "See for yourself what is really happening. But," he added, "when you come back, you will have a responsibility to tell people about it."

My decision to go to South Africa was ultimately catalyzed by what I didn't see when I reached Zimbabwe. I had planned to spend time in Zimbabwe experiencing "the revolution" that had culminated in independence in 1980. The problem was that the Zimbabwe that I saw was hardly revolutionary. The white oligarchy remained comfortably in control of the economy, President Robert Mugabe was outlawing opposition parties, government troops were rumored to be slaughtering black opponents in the southern part of the country, and the hope for niceties such as land reform was becoming increasingly remote. My rose-colored glasses were rudely yanked from my face.

After the Zimbabwean revolution that wasn't, South Africa offered the more promising prospect of a democratic revolution that might be. Sue and I reached Johannesburg and were quickly immersed in a crash course in South African politics. Each day we would troop to Khotso House, the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches and a variety of other social action groups. We would then join various field workers as they made their rounds in the townships, pass courts, community meetings, and rural areas.

It was ultimately our journey hitchhiking across the country in 1984 that gave us the most intimate view of the geography of apartheid. South Africa enjoyed a reputation among European travelers as one of the easiest places in Africa to hitchhike. Motivated by equal parts curiosity, innocence, and lack of funds, we set out on backroads through the black "homelands," through small rural farm towns, and into the major cities. Occasionally we would be picked up by black truckers and brought into the townships, where we were invariably ushered into the homes of community leaders and activists. In spite of the deep racial antagonisms in the country, black South Africans were remarkably warm and welcoming to us. We hung out in township *shebeens,* the informal (and illegal) bars in

people's homes, and opened our eyes and ears to the world of black South Africans. They were eager to tell us their stories.

Late 1984 was a time of the most significant political agitation since the 1976 Soweto riots. I was astonished and humbled by the remarkable commitment and courage of the people we met. Bringing down the apartheid system seemed an utterly quixotic task. Yet for better or worse, numerous people threw themselves at the challenge with all their might, and sometimes with their lives. There was the township student who fought against police and armored troop vehicles with rocks, the only weapon available to him. There were the women of the squatter camps who battled regularly with police to save their shacks—the one place their families could be together. There were young whites being thrown into jail for refusing to serve in the South African Defense Force.

There was also the dark side of resistance politics. Suspected political "traitors" were tried in kangaroo courts and brutally killed on dubious evidence. And crime was rampant in the townships, with crooks often hiding their criminality behind the guise of "the struggle."

I set about chronicling the nuances of the grassroots opposition for a variety of publications in the United States and the United Kingdom. As I spoke with activists, I couldn't help putting myself in their shoes: Which one of these people would *I* be if I lived here? Would I devote myself to the struggle? Or would I hide behind middle-class comforts and turn a blind eye to the evil being perpetrated in my name? These were discomforting questions to which I had no answer.

From the comfort of foreign shores, it was easy to demonize those responsible for the hardship I witnessed. But as I traveled from black world to white, stereotypes of crude, greedy whites fell away. Time and again after being picked up by white travelers, this haggard pair of wanderers with strange accents would be offered accommodations, meals, rides, and referrals in the next town. Simply put, white South Africans were the most hospitable people I had met anywhere in the world. Perhaps it was a result of being citizens of an outcast nation that they extended such generosity to a rare pair of foreign (white) visitors. The genuine warmth of our reception was always disarming and quite welcome at the end of a long day. These intimate encounters added a complexity and depth to my picture of South Africa that I had not anticipated.

The generosity we received was all the more jarring when juxtaposed

with the racism that our hosts would invariably express. The lectures about how "our blacks are different than your American blacks" was depressingly inevitable and sounded like it had all been read from the same script. Bigotry was always dressed up as something more sophisticated, of course. The language of apartheid was positively Orwellian: blacks were not victims of forced removals, they were beneficiaries of "separate development"; whites were not racists, they were simply "pro-white." And so an entire white population could view its racist policies not as forms of greed and injustice, but as helping the childlike blacks grow up. Viewed through this cheery and charitable lens, it became more understandable how good people could be doing such bad things. Such was the banal, smiling, Christian face of evil.

What could explain this bizarre duality of white South Africans? The answer lay partly in how successful apartheid was in separating people. What seemed to be an impossible task of physics—namely, hiding 87 percent of the population from view of the white minority—was in fact done remarkably well. As I shuttled back and forth between white and black worlds, I was surprised by how intimately familiar blacks were with white life, a result of providing the servant labor that made white middle-class life so comfortable. I was similarly struck by how comically naive whites were about black reality. As a foreigner who had spent only a few months crisscrossing their country, I could safely say that I had seen more of black life and culture than nearly any white South African I met.

Apartheid had long since become an exercise in self-delusion by the 1980s. Whites had created an elaborate fantasy world in which blacks featured only as maids and laborers. Whites then mistook this fantasy for reality. In the absence of any substantive interracial contact, whites conjured up ethnological theories about how blacks thought and felt, flights of fancy that they would unashamedly share with me. Separation and isolation were crucial elements in enabling whites to view blacks as subhuman at worst, childlike at best. Today in the post-apartheid era, many whites seem shocked to learn not only that blacks felt badly about the indignities heaped upon them, but that blacks felt anything at all.

A steady undercurrent of fear marked my travels in South Africa and war-torn Namibia in the mid-1980s. Paranoia is the elixir of police-state life. If you did anything that trampled the divide between the races, you had reason to be nervous. As a white American, I bore relatively few risks

besides being *uitgeskop* ("out kicked") from the country. Nevertheless, I was apprehensive about getting caught in black areas by the police, of being exposed as a journalist while traveling under the pretext of being a tourist, and of being caught with a variety of "banned" literature. Fear was life in apartheid South Africa; if you wanted to see what was really happening, you just lived with it.

When I finally rode the train out of South Africa and crossed the border back into Zimbabwe in 1984, it was as if a weight had been lifted from my head. I went on to travel in the West African nation of Gabon and was stunned by the *joie de vivre* that was a part of daily life for blacks there. The Gabonese had a gaiety, lightness of step, and healthy indifference for the color of my skin that was in refreshing contrast to the dejected spirit of so many black South Africans. It was among the proud and cheerful people of "black Africa" that I recognized the depth of the tragedy that "white Africa" had perpetrated.

In June 1990, I was one of millions of Americans who attended mass gatherings to welcome the newly freed Nelson Mandela on his triumphant tour of the United States. As I stood shoulder to shoulder with tens of thousands of other people on the winding shores of the Charles River in Boston, I was deeply moved as the tall African gentleman with a fringe of silver hair ascended the stage to the strains of Hugh Masakela's trumpet. He spoke of reconciliation and freedom, and promised that South Africa's long nightmare would soon be over. His presence left the racially divided city where I lived with an all too brief afterglow of interracial harmony.

I returned to South Africa one month later to see for myself what life beyond apartheid might look like and to document the changing political landscape for several magazines. The South Africa of 1990 was a country still pinching itself to make sure it was not dreaming. The African National Congress and South African Communist Party were now legal. Many of the petty indignities of apartheid, such as the ubiquitous EUROPEANS ONLY signs, had vanished. I was astonished to enter the Braamfontein Bookstore in Johannesburg and find racks of previously banned "subversive" texts, including tracts by Marx, Mandela, Lenin, Joe Slovo, Frantz Fanon, and Ché Guevara. Johannesburg's irreverent new independent Radio 702 brought the moribund airways to life with provoca-

tive talk shows that featured appearances by recently exiled and jailed liberation leaders. Freedom seemed so close . . .

And then disaster struck. On July 13, 1990—days after I had arrived in the country—a heavily armed gang of men opened fire on black commuters on the Soweto-Johannesburg train line. It was the beginning of a sustained period of politically organized bloodletting. The results were tragic. A Sunday in September 1990 that I spent in the black township of Kagiso, on the outskirts of Johannesburg, was all too typical. A long tide of people, chanting and gyrating the *toyi-toyi* protest dance, moved slowly down the rutted main thoroughfare. Dust swirled around us, coating me in a fine red film. Bobbing in the current of this human river were nineteen colorful boxes. Each box was draped in the black, green, and gold colors of the newly unbanned African National Congress. Inside each box was a body.

At the soccer stadium, the caskets were lined up and opened in an orderly row. This was the backdrop for yet another mass funeral. These funerals had become a weekly ritual as the toll from the township carnage mounted. The families filed by slowly to pay their last respects. I still remember their faces. The old mama whose soft visage twisted in grief at the sight of her dead son. The teenage boy who after catching a final glimpse of his lifeless brother collapsed in a heap next to me.

"This is the saddest thing I have ever seen in my life," I scribbled in my notebook, as I tried to compose myself to record the event.

As recently freed ANC stalwart Walter Sisulu rose to address the assembled crowd, a disturbance broke out. Residents began pointing and surging toward two white men who were holding a TV camera and appeared to be journalists. I asked another reporter if he recognized the men; he did not. But the local people did: they identified them as plainclothes security policemen. "Dogs!" the people began screaming. "Murderers!"

The two men began backing up toward an opening in the stadium fence. I followed the crowd as it advanced on the men. Suddenly, the two "journalists" pulled out guns and took aim. People began screaming and scattering. A primal fear surged through me and I instinctively sprinted away with the crowd. A panicked but courageous church minister stepped between the armed men and the crowd, pleading with the mob to back off peacefully. The anxious cops continued to flaunt their weapons, arcing them side to side. Finally, an armored police vehicle pulled up to the

opening in the fence and whisked the men away. For once, this township funeral would not be a prelude to another one.

The story that Kagiso residents told me that day is one I heard in numerous other townships I visited during that bloody period: police came earlier in the week to disarm the men in the hostels. The next day, a group of vigilantes from Inkatha, the Zulu political organization that had degenerated into a right-wing paramilitary force, came and attacked. When township residents tried to come to the aid of the hostel dwellers, white policemen appeared and drove back the rescuers, allowing the massacre to continue unabated. The attack was then dutifully reported in the press as a chilling example of "black on black" violence.

I asked a family member of one of the Kagiso victims about the roots of the violence. "This violence is not tribal," she insisted emphatically. "It is factored, well-fabricated violence to destabilize us and distract us from our main goal: getting to the constitutional [negotiating] table." She was right, of course.

The "free" South Africa I had come to see was not quite ready to be born. For nearly four years, South Africa teetered precariously on the brink of civil war. Fourteen thousand people died under the reign of President F. W. de Klerk—co-recipient, with Nelson Mandela, of the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize—double the total of political deaths that occurred in the previous forty years.[5] It was an excruciating contradiction: Mandela was free, yet the suffering of black South Africans had only deepened. It was a sobering harbinger of things to come.

And then, finally, the moment South Africans had dared to long for: from April 26 to 29, 1994, South Africa held the first democratic elections in its history. The much-feared all-out war promised by the white right wing never materialized. And the bloody black backlash that white South Africans spent their lives fearing stayed firmly in the realm of fantasy, where it always belonged. As Nelson Mandela ascended the steps of the Union Buildings in Pretoria on a brisk autumn day in May 1994 to become South Africa's first black president, a miracle happened. Or so the world wanted to believe.

What happened to South Africa? What became of apartheid? These were the questions that lured me back to South Africa in 1996. I came with my wife and daughter to spend a year exploring a historic transformation.

Nelson Mandela, already a twentieth-century political icon, was president, and a nation was struggling to re-create itself as something it had never been: a nonracial democracy. It was a chance to witness history as it was made. And maybe it was a chance to resolve the obsession with a distant country that had begun nearly two decades earlier for an impressionable college student.

I found much that was both confounding and inspiring in "the new South Africa" as I settled with my family in Cape Town. The poignant symbols of change were the first thing that grabbed me. Even white right-wingers I met were moved by Mandela's emergence from prison to forgive his tormentors. His magnanimity was at once politically shrewd and emotionally breathtaking.

Then there has been the image of South Africa's triumphant return to the world stage after years of isolation. Mandela has been widely acclaimed as the world's most popular statesman, a reputation that is confirmed by the glowing receptions he has received in the world's capitals. South Africa was welcomed back into the United Nations and the Commonwealth of Nations, and international sanctions were lifted. Queen Elizabeth paid a historic visit to the former British colony.

For South Africa's sports-mad whites, by far the greatest post-apartheid benefit has been the end of the boycott that grounded their beloved sports teams for decades. South Africa's athletes have even risen to the occasion: the nation came to a standstill when the national rugby team, the Springboks, upset New Zealand to claim the 1995 World Cup title. (Mandela outraged many black activists by appearing on the field dressed in a team jersey and celebrating the triumph of the Springboks, once a hated symbol of white culture. It was a brilliant political gesture, as his appearance instantly deflated the sails of the white right.) This was followed closely by the national soccer team, Bafana Bafana, winning the Africa Nations Cup, and the 1996 Olympic gold medals for miner-cum-marathoner Josia Thugwane and swimmer Penny Heyns.

Throughout 1996 and 1997, I was touched by numerous other scenes of a nation rebuilding and recovering. I watched the women of the Victoria Mxenge housing project outside Cape Town hefting cinder blocks and erecting new homes alongside their squatter shacks, brick by brick. There were the squatters of Marconi Beam who were finally moving into their first permanent homes in the development they named Joe Slovo