

THE PARK

James Matthews

THE PARK

and other stories

James Matthews



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James Matthews left school at 13, knowing that he wanted to be a writer. A teacher once gave him 101 out of 100 for an essay and pinned it to the classroom wall.

He has been involved in most phases of black writing in South Africa since its first flowering in the 1950s, and is currently active in the Congress of South African Writers. His own writing has an authority drawn from being black in present-day South Africa, and has led to his being detained without trial.

*This one is for Jimi, Quinton, Terry, Jason,
and not forgetting Ché*

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The Portable Radio

He gazed morosely at the shop windows as he slouched along the pavement, his feet kicking at small objects in front of him. He stopped at a large window displaying furniture in a modern bedroom setting.

He looked at the luxurious bed with its warm, downy blankets and imagined himself sinking into its yielding softness and covering himself with its warmth. He thought of his own bare room and reached out a hand to scratch himself where one of his bedfellows was having a late breakfast.

He could still hear the mean voice of his aunt when he told her of the insects sharing his bed. Her voice turned into a screech as she berated him.

'If it wasn't that you my sister's boy, the streets have you a long time ago. Here I getting old trying to run a respectable house and you not raising a hand to help me. Job after job the white people give you but work you don't. If you want your room clean, you do it!'

He grimaced as he relived the scene. He moved nearer to the window, his attention centred on the bed. It was built with a shelf that ran across the head to the floor on either side. The shelf was filled with

books, and a portable radio took pride of place within reach of a reclining figure.

He leaned against the window and closed his eyes. It felt good. The warm blankets enfolded him and filled him with sensuous languor. He reached out a hand and switched on the radio on the shelf above his head, his fingers caressing the protruding knobs. He twisted one and moved from station to station like a bee in search of pollen, leaving a wake of news and music. Settling on one, he leaned back to enjoy the melody.

A rude voice threw him out of paradise. 'Look! Would you mind getting away from the window?'

The smug face and cleanliness of the white man made him wince inwardly. His own shirt was in such a condition that if he were to pass a laundry at less than five yards, the collar would drop off. He walked on, saddened.

'Anything we could offer you?' 'Shoes for the family?' 'Something for the house?' The voices of the shop assistants posted in front of their shops rang out for the benefit of the people passing. None of them had a word for him or spared him a glance as he walked past.

Sometimes he wished he had a steady job but he knew it could never be. Some time ago, a long time ago, he had had a job. But he could not stand it. The regular working hours were too confining. The large office filled with sunshine and white pretty girls in whose presence he always felt embarrassed. The sunshine he did not mind but the women in their freshly-starched frocks, bare-armed and smelling of lily of the valley, always made him acutely aware of them. Each time he passed or stood in front of them he broke into a cold sweat and could not resist looking at the

curve of their breasts and the joggle of tightly-packed buttocks as they walked. He felt out of place among such an abundance of fresh femininity, and whenever he was sent out on an errand he would drop in at a bar along the way for a glass of wine. When the day ended he would be in a happy mood and smile at them when they bade him goodnight.

They sacked him when they discovered that, while drunk, he had forgotten to post a batch of important letters given earlier in the week. After that he lost job after job for the same reason. He drifted into casual work and the little he earned was spent on wine. He did not stop drinking despite his aunt's pleading and ranting.

He scarcely looked at the windows he passed. The trouble with his aunt was a thing of the past. Even his objectionable bedfellows were of no importance. His mind was filled with the portable radio he had seen. The richness of its colour, the gleaming plastic covering, the long shiny aerial, and the music he could get from it at will. Even the thought of wine was not strong enough to distract him from it.

His foot kicked against something heavy, the heel of his shoe dragging it along. The weight of the object shifted the last nail that held the heel secure. He stared with dismay at the heel which peeped back at him from the side of the shoe.

A small tobacco pouch was next to the heel.

His nerves tensed like a pointer spotting its quarry. He moved back to the wall and dragged the pouch with his foot. He scratched his calf nonchalantly. A few more scratches and the pouch was in his hand.

His fingers flowed over the unyielding surface. He was puzzled. The contents could not be tobacco; it was too bulky, and he could feel sharp edges. He

undid the top while covering the pouch from observing eyes. The greenness of bank-notes wrapped around some object was revealed. Furtively he slipped the pouch into his pocket and walked away towards home.

He kept his hand in his pocket lest its contents disappear like some crazy dream. He was deliriously happy and felt like doing a dance on the pavement but, seeing a policeman on the corner, decided against it. The policeman might not understand his feelings of elation and arrest him for being drunk. He was not taking any chances with what he had in his pocket.

He ran the gauntlet of his aunt's sharp tongue as he made for his room. A glance showed that his aunt had made her usual search for concealed liquor. After making sure that the door was bolted he drew the pouch from his pocket, his fingers rubbing against it lovingly, and spilled the contents on the table. He unwrapped the bank-notes from the objects they covered and saw that they were four half-crowns.

There were eight five-pound notes. He arrayed them in a line, then changed the pattern. He made four piles and placed a half-crown on each pile. He lingered on the greenness. Forty pounds. A fortune.

A sound came from the doorway. He grabbed the money and shoved it into his pocket. He walked on tiptoe to the door and with one swift movement drew the bolt and swung it open.

His aunt was framed in the doorway like Cupid in the act of releasing an arrow.

'Why do you lock the door? If it's wine you bring into your room, you can just carry it out again. It's

sick I am of the mess you make!’

‘It’s not wine I got,’ he meekly replied.

‘Remember what I say this morning!’ With this last threat she waddled her way along the passage, the staircase protesting as she shifted her weight from foot to foot.

He searched his pockets for a stub of pencil, and on the back of a calendar that served also as a decoration, he worked out his fortune. He had more than enough to pay for the portable. He looked at himself in the mirror. He would have to buy something to wear first or else they might refuse to serve him. The white man with the smug face was not likely to let him pass the door without asking many questions.

His aunt was working in the kitchen; he could hear the banging of pots. Silently he crept down the stairs and out of the house.

He went to the second-hand shop where most of the neighbourhood bought their clothing. It also served as a clearing house for those with goods to sell.

He selected a white linen suit, a pair of canvas shoes and a pale blue shirt. He was drawn to a rattan cane on which hung a cheap panama hat. He could not resist the temptation and bought the lot, adding a blue and white candy-striped tie. He spotted a blanket on his way out, made a quick calculation, and bought it. With the generosity of the newly-rich, he threw the sixpence change to the boy helping in the shop.

His aunt spotted him before he could mount the stairs.

‘Hey! What’s that you got under your arms?’ She eyed the bulky parcel suspiciously.

He took some money out of his pocket and gave

her a pound. 'I had some luck, Auntie. Buy yourself a present.'

She stood contemplating the money in her hand, and before she could speak, he was past her and climbing the steps to his room. She murmured something and put the money into the large pocket of the apron encasing her ample bosom.

He stood at the top of the stairs and called for hot water with which to shave. After some delay, his aunt pulled her bulk up the stairs. She slammed the container on the table with a baleful glare in his direction, splashing the water which she wiped off with the edge of her apron.

A hot bath and a shave later, he emerged resplendent in his new suit, panama hat dipped at a jaunty angle. With a twirl of his cane he walked down the stairs. His green-flecked teeth added colour to his brown face as he walked past his speechless aunt. 'I'll be back in a hour,' he said.

Each attendant vied for his attention as he walked past the shops in Waterkant Street.

The salesman did not recognise him when he entered the shop.

'What can I do for you, sir?'

He did not reply at once, savouring the servility of the salesman. He looked at a table and four padded chairs. Picking up a reading lamp, he watched the man hovering nearby. He turned towards him.

'I want to buy a portable radio.'

'Step this way, sir. I'll be glad to show you our latest models.' The salesman was like a cat confronted with a cup of cream. He was almost purring with

pleasure.

He stood with affected boredom as if buying a radio set was a tiresome procedure.

The salesman flitted from set to set, twisting knobs, pulling out aerials, sending forth a blare of music with the twist of a wrist, praising one set for its colour scheme and another for its durability. He occupied himself with an imaginary speck of dust on his coat, carefully flicking it away with a large cotton handkerchief which he folded into a triangle and replaced in his breast pocket.

His choice was narrowed down to two sets. He had to choose between the glitter of one and the durability of the other. He held back. The portable with its shiny surface would surely raise him in the estimation of his aunt. On the other hand, the second set could be played by battery and when exhausted could be converted to electricity. The salesman was silent, hardly daring to breathe lest he disturb the fish nibbling at the hook. He took the set with the battery.

His aunt followed him into the room. Placing the portable on the table, he told her to close her eyes while he undid the wrapping. Reluctantly she complied with his request. He laughed as her face broke into pieces at the sight of the portable radio. He used all the technical terms he could remember as he explained to her how it worked and its advantages.

Work was forgotten while his aunt shared with him the hours of listening to the music. Even news reports were listened to with avid interest.

Dressed in his finery, he spent the days holding court in the bar on the corner and at night he would return swaying ever so slightly, and with the smell of wine on his breath. His aunt overlooked it all, and a plate of hot food awaited him each night.

In the dim glow of his room, and covered by the extra warmth of his new blanket, he would ease back, stroking the soft surface of the blanket while the music flowed over him in waves of contentment.

His aunt tolerated him even when his drinking bouts became more frequent and lasted longer, until finally he had no more money left.

The panama hat and the rattan cane were the first to go. It brought him enough to buy a bottle of wine. He held on to the suit as long as he could but his thirst was too strong. The second-hand dealer stood with a complacent air as he handed over the money.

He was too dispirited to argue and walked listlessly from the store. Around his neck was the candy-coloured tie curling at the edges but still making a brave attempt to strike a gay note, making him look like a discarded Christmas tree. His canvas shoes completed the picture, adding a smell of their own.

He walked home with the two bottles of wine ignoring the pleas from his former courtiers.

He put the two bottles down on the table and switched on the portable. The indicator showed no bright gleam. He tried it again with the same result. Then it dawned on him that the electricity was cut off. He turned a knob at the back of the portable and converted it to battery. The indicator jumped to life when he switched it on and music rushed forth.

His aunt entered the room and glared at him. The wine had removed his fear of her. 'You forget about the batteries.' His voice ended in a giggle. She slammed the door.

He took off his shoes and fell back on the bed with a bottle near at hand.

A roar of music woke him the next morning. His throat was dry. Next to the bed stood the remaining

bottle which he opened and held up, the wine trickling from the side of his mouth.

The continuous playing soon drained the batteries and he spent miserable days cooped up in his room.

Through the window he could see the time on the foundry clock. It would be a good four hours before his aunt would switch on the lights. He stretched himself out on the bed and tried to sleep.

The light streaming from beneath the door when he awoke told him that it was time to switch on the portable.

He fiddled around with the dial, trying each wave-band in turn. He tuned into stations he never knew existed.

Brazil called with the throb of drums pounding out a South American rhythm that jerked his body alive. Mexico contributed a fiesta, bringing to mind a vision of pretty señoritas and gay caballeros strumming guitars and dancing a fandango. The plaintive wail of a clarinet moaning the 'Birth of the Blues' welcomed him to the U.S.

He turned it on to its full volume, the music flooding his room and spilling out into the passage, rolling downstairs until it filled the house.

The music was a drug and it soothed him.

It was suddenly snatched away in the midst of its healing as the lights went off in the passage. He looked at the portable and then grabbed it by its sides and shook it violently. From outside the door his aunt called him. 'See how you like it. I had enough of you. I turn off the light and tomorrow you clear out and take that damn box of noise with you.' Then she laughed. Louder, ever louder, until it seemed that the now silent portable had somehow been transplanted inside her. 'Hee-hee, haw-haw,' her laughter lashed,

sending him cringing beneath the blankets with his fingers pressed into his ears. 'Hee-hee, haw-haw,' it rumbled around him. He flung the blankets aside and grabbed the portable, raised it overhead and smashed it against the wall. 'Hee-hee, haw-haw, ho-ho.' It was still present, stronger, louder, a dynamo of diabolical merriment. 'Hee-hee, haw-haw, ho-ho-ho.' The peals of laughter made his body writhe.

Eyes glazed, he took hold of the empty bottle, smashed the top on the edge of the table, and crept quietly from the room to silence the 'hee-hee, haw-haw, ho-ho-ho' that threatened to tear him to shreds.

ncident

With a muted clickety-clack the train passed under the bridge and came to a halt in the station after a series of convulsive jerks that shook him awake. From behind the misted panes he squinted at the familiar billboard with the poster depicting a white couple clad in bathing costumes and enjoying a can of beer on a beach he could never share. The chill was like death met head-on and he hesitated before stepping out from the warmth of the coach to the cold of the platform. Behind him, head poked out through a window, a ticket examiner hurried the crowd reluctant to leave the third-class carriage. Turtle-like, he pulled his neck deeper into his coat collar and hurried towards the subway.

One more day done, or rather, one more night, he told himself as he walked down the street away from the station. A dog howled at his appearance. The howl was taken up by other dogs farther on marking his progress. He peered at the sky piled with dirty, grey clouds poised as if to smash against each other and drench the earth below. I only hope I get home before they let go.

Ahead of him, a block away, scurried one of his