

LEWIS NKOSI

# Encounter with New York

PART ONE



ONE PEARLY-WHITE WINTER evening in the January of 1961 we were winging down over New York. From the air all I saw were the endless blocks of skyscrapers forming themselves into patterns of light and darkness, and roadways scarring the face of the land like huge streaks of paint thrown recklessly over a large canvass.

At night cities have always held a strange fascination for me. They seem always to conceal a streak of ruthlessness, of something terribly bitchy and seamy; and New York was no exception.

However, once we had deplaned I was conscious only of the cold which seemed to have teeth in it. My immediate reaction was to flinch from this strange cold place, to sheathe my body more securely within my warm African skin. Also, almost immediately, there went up to my throat an insane, awfully childish cry which demanded of this land that it should enfold me, love me more dearly than all the others, as though I deserved an especial attention.

Wasn't I one of those who had been hurt worse than most people, and didn't I therefore deserve more affection than anybody else? But I had also assumed, automatically, a guarded stance. As always with conceited people, there was that desire to resist being taken in by the spurious; I certainly wasn't going to allow myself to be blinded by the gadgetary gloss of America; and because I thought America expected every visitor from the smaller countries to pay homage to all this gadgetry—certainly to its magnificent technology—it suddenly became important to refuse to oblige.

Jack Thompson, the executive director of Farfield Foundation, and the man most instrumental for my coming out to America, was waiting on the balcony of the airport lobby. I saw him almost immediately: tall, handsome, always seeming to carry his American self-assurance with a kind of ease which precludes gestures of arrogance. Jack Thompson seems to embody all the qualities of the younger generation of Americans who, knowing that they are citizens of the greatest country on earth, find it almost obligatory to be self-effacing and wryly self-contemplating. They look as though they are uneasy about the power which their country possesses; and there certainly is about them a strange look of a ravaged innocence.

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LEWIS NKOSI left Johannesburg for Harvard on a permanent exit visa. He is at present in England.

Jack and I waved briefly at each other, then he went on smoking his pipe. American intellectuals are carrying on an extraordinary love affair with pipes. They are always stuffing them with tobacco the same way they stuff their minds with facts; and while they suck on them they manage, somehow, to look frightfully apocalyptic!

Jack Thompson and I had our first drink at the airport bar. The last time we had had a drink together was at Western Native Township on one incredibly hot night. We had "kidnapped" Jack from the self-consuming monotony and boredom of the Park Town-Houghton parties and had consummated one of those ritualistically nocturnal excursions into the bawdy, crowded townships. The following morning Jack had carried with him into the plane to Ghana a man-sized hangover. Now we sat at the Idlewild Airport bar, sipping somewhat obscenely, it seemed to me, whiskey that might have been tossed down the throat in the social claustrophobia of the Johannesburg townships.

During the long drive by cab from the airport to the Thompson apartment I felt nothing but awe for the new land—and this in spite of myself. This awe, I know, had something to do with bigness which seemed to swallow everything and to reduce the dimensions of everything to an uncomfortable size. The houses and the river bridges seemed to stretch on endlessly, and the cars streaked along the broad driveways with a kind of urgency which made a stranger to America wonder just where the Americans were all hurrying to. It seemed as though everybody was on wheels; everybody was going somewhere! Certainly if there is any one thing that has revolutionised the social character of

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American life, it is this cheap availability of the automobile to all social classes. Everybody seems to have a compelling urge to get out on the road and go somewhere.

The first encounter with New York is nothing if not the encounter with the New York cab driver. If the impressions which we gather from sociological textbooks about foreign places sometimes fail to coincide with reality, almost anything ever said about New York cab drivers is partly, if not wholly, true. They are mean to other drivers on the road; they are loquacious; and their encyclopaedic knowledge on any conceivable subject, from wage-price parity to nuclear physics, is certainly unnerving. We had hardly finished telling our cab driver that I was from Johannesburg and he was already displaying his familiarity with the entangled problems of Dr. Verwoerd's republic: "Isn't that the place where they are hard on Negroes?" he asked rhetorically. I settled back in my seat and allowed myself to be lectured on American democracy, which is a specialty with taxi drivers encountering foreigners in New York. The only jarring note which might have escaped my tutor was that we were driving through a nauseating Puerto Rican and Negro slum; however, he continued his lecture, his enthusiasm showing no sign of abating.

To tell the truth, my first encounter with New York was none too pleasing for me. It was extremely cold and the city had hardly recovered from a snow-storm which had paralysed it all through Christmas. But apart from the weather, there was something chilling about New York—at least during my first two days there. Not even the long drives and walks around the city succeeded in dispelling my disquiet about New York. The city was hard and cold in the same way, I suppose, Johannesburg is, except that Johannesburg's cold is tempered by an irrepressible African gaiety. Although New York has much of the same robustness, and perhaps more, it is much too big. It is exasperatingly chaotic. It also can be the loneliest city in the world. This loneliness has nothing to do with the strangeness of the place. I began to wonder whether I had not, overnight, become a reactionary who was beginning to hate progress. I certainly yearned for the warm intimacy of Europe, for the sheer presence of old age and the gentle politeness of London. Whereas in New York it seemed important that one should be with the kind of people one knew and liked, in London, as soon as I had known my way around, I had needed nobody as I drifted around the city in a continuous flirtation with its ageless streets and buildings.

It was in the next months that I began to develop a sneaking affection for New York. One falls in love with that city—at least I did—in much the same way that one falls in love with an incurably and hopelessly bitchy woman. One suffers in the process, and sometimes in an impossible kind of burning fury, one leaves her only to return days later with the tail between one's legs and flowers in one's hands. Even at the end of a love affair with New York, just before one leaves her, there is the same kind of dissatisfied longing for one more encounter. New York is metaphorically, and really, an awful kind of grabbing gold-digging bitch, yet capable of extravagant passions. ●

# AFRICANA

Contributions should be sent to *Africana*,  
P.O. Box 2068, Cape Town

- Thanks for the ride, Major P. Pity our interpretations of sincerity differ. Personal column, *Rand Daily Mail*.
- Until fairly recently, the Public Service, with its vast number of vacancies every year, was regarded by many people as the last resort for those who were unable to get jobs of their choice in commerce and industry. Standards have climbed so steeply in the service, however, that even here only men and women with good education qualifications can hope to find suitable employment. A spokesman of the Public Service Commission told me yesterday: "We are not just taking anybody any more like we used to do in the days of a shortage of labour."—*Sunday Express*.
- "No place overseas that I know can give you anything like South Africa's wonderful climate or its ease and its comfort for ordinary people. And so as the Blue Train moved north . . .": Mrs. Bertha Solomon in the *Rand Daily Mail*. (D. S. Livingstone)
- The State President and Mrs. Swart have accepted an invitation from the Grahamstown City Council to be the principal guests of honour at the centenary celebrations of the Grahamstown municipality . . . A committee has been formed to organise the programme for the centenary, which will include special celebrations for schoolchildren and also for the non-European population of Grahamstown.—*East London Daily Dispatch*.
- Two women's pistol clubs in Johannesburg have adopted uniforms for their members. One of them the Regent's Park, also has a badge inscribed CCC (Cool Calm and Collected). Nancefield has dark-green pinafore-style dresses with special pockets to hold bullets—*Rand Daily Mail* (John Harris).
- Dr. M— had told the court that his wife deserted him in April 1960, and that she had committed adultery with a police sergeant (first class) at Bizana.—*Golden City Post*.
- Coloured, very fair, finds difficulty in obtaining work because of fair skin. In urgent need of employment. Possesses heavy-duty and public service licences.—Situations wanted, *The Star*.
- A few inhibitions hinder you, sapping your felicity. Get rid of them swiftly. No charges. Enquiries welcome.—Personal column, *Sunday Times*.
- They accept everything offered to them, provided it is for the progress and advancement of the Bantu people and a method of teaching them to serve their own people. Bantu education, Bantu homelands and European liquor are all welcome.—*Die Banier*.