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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ON TRANSVESTITES AND BARBERS

Some South Africans Struggle With More Than Race

c/o INCWA

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Dear Peter,

The women behind the glass storefront first smirk then giggle, and finally start laughing at me as I peer in the shop window. It's a barbershop, or hair salon to be precise and I don't really care that they're laughing at me. I just want a haircut and I'm only looking for the price, and because I don't feel there is anything more comic than usual about my appearance I pass off their laughter as pure silliness.

The price is good and the women are "coloured" of mixed race so I decide to return the next morning for a haircut. Because I haven't seen any coloured barbers so far in downtown Johannesburg this looks inviting, even with the silliness. I usually get my hair cut by an Italian on Bree Street. Enzo's is just two blocks from the Carlton Hotel Complex, which is "international," which means it is not only legally acceptable but even socially acceptable for nonwhites like me to get my hair cut there—of course, for about

three times the price of Enzo's.

However, Enzo's is a good place to go because the price is low and from the start when I sat down in Enzo's chair for a haircut he didn't act like he was being asked to touch something that had just crawled out of the Black Lagoon. The only problem has been no matter what I say to him Enzo always cuts off almost all of my hair, and then oils and sprays and blow-dries what is left.

He is from Italy and friendly and not much more of a racist than most of the foreigners who have come to South Africa for a higher standard of living than could ever possibly be had back in Europe. Enzo knows how good he has it here; he avoids politics and makes it pleasant to visit him. Even after an absence of months he remembers me, and he acknowledges a good tip.

Unfortunately, after a number of negative comments from my friends on the state of coiffure I decided

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it was time to change barbers. After the British woman I was dating told me that after one of Enzo's cuts I looked and smelled like a "wop" I decided it was time for a change in that department too.

Saturday morning in Johannesburg is a good time for a haircut. Downtown is absolutely mobbed with shoppers, but not with people seeking haircuts.

The boutique is run entirely by coloured women, and when I go inside they are reasonably friendly. Two of the four are attractive, but in an unusual, disconcerting way. The woman who decides to cut my hair is tall and too thin for her build. She looks boney. While she works I notice many of her movements are very elaborate and well, swishy. She swishes her hands through the air and around my head. She pushes a strand of her own hair out of her face with a gesture that somehow involves her entire body. Coloured politics she won't discuss with me and when I say something about the blacks her response is impatient, disinterested, almost catty.

At this point I think to myself, "what an effeminate person," and then talk banalities for the remainder of the haircut. Not until I'm paying in the front waiting room, and three of them are together chatting that I come to a realization: women aren't effeminate, women are feminine. Exaggerated and contrived femininity is effeminate and not usually found in women.

Even taller than the woman who cut my hair is the owner of the shop, and her gestures are much the same. Her face is very

pock-marked, angular, and not very appealing. When she speaks, her voice has a good deal of bass in it, and her movements don't quite fit her body.

If I had doubts when I walked in, the sidelong glances and inappropriate gaiety only increased them. When the fourth woman returned, unquestionably a woman, I could clearly see the other three people in the room were really men dressed as women. They were dressed very well and convincingly, but your eagle-eyed correspondent was not fooled (completely) for (very) long. As to why they were dressed as women, I have to turn to another coloured woman (real), for insight.

"There are lots of pressures on coloured people here," my friend Sister Ebrahim, a maternity nurse explains a few days later. "There are lots of these men who want to dress and behave like women. It's my opinion it is because they are very much caught in the middle of this society, like not very much by either the whites or Africans [blacks] that some behave so strangely."

It's not an unreasonable theory. Only two days later, in a large Johannesburg department store I come across two extremely flamboyant coloured men who are wearing high heels and make-up and carry handbags. Although they are wearing pants and jackets, these are tailored in a way few men would wear them. At the perfume counter they are standing and talking about makeup with the saleswomen. The men are particularly interesting because they are not trying to pass themselves off as women. Clearly, they are two men

dressed partially as men, partially as women, speaking with their own male voices but acting somewhat effeminate. Loud and demonstrative, they clearly make sure they are the center of attention. The white saleswomen, well-dressed themselves, are warpainted; either Revlon or Lanvin seem to love this pair.

I don't know quite what to think, but it somehow makes sense.

In a country where the government tells so many people what they should be, there's bound to be rebellion in funny forms. South Africa has at least five different official categories of coloured people. They are Coloured, Malay, Cape Malay, Cape Coloured, Other Coloured." That's a lot of official defining for a subject as imprecise as racial make-up. As they do for the blacks, the government dictates where various coloureds may or may not work, and where they may or may not live. The government also dictates who they may or may not marry, and on one occasion it tried to dictate in which language black and coloured children could or could not be taught. (The language was Afrikaans, the mother tongue of the ruling white minority.) The latter regulation attempt resulted in the 1976 Soweto riots in which the South African police dictated that 973 naughty coloured and black children and teenagers could no longer continue to be. (They were shot dead.)

So, when in the midst of all of this, some coloured people assert their freedom of choice

in the one area left remaining to assert themselves, namely their sexuality, it doesn't surprise me at all to find a few men dressed partially or completely like women. It makes a certain amount of sense, although I am no behavioral psychologist, and wouldn't for a minute pretend to be able to validate this.

Then again, I've been living in Hillbrow, a part of town that most South Africans consider the most crime-ridden, immoral, lascivious community in the country—about like any good sized American city-center. So far, I have not run into any black or white transvestites there.

On the subject of coloured transvestites, any further research will be left to chance encounters. I'm going back to Enzo's for my haircuts.

Best Regards,



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