

ICWA LETTERS

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Thelma's Shoes

DURBAN, South Africa

May 1996

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter:

After I filed my third newsletter, you rightly observed that South Africa is like a house of mirrors to me, a black American woman raised in the South during the height of the Civil Rights movement. This month's newsletter is an essay, describing what I experienced when I saw a reflection of myself in one of those mirrors.

A knock at the door came at 12:30 p.m. sharp. I opened it and there stood Thelma. She arrived to clean the flat, not mine but a neighbor's. The neighbor couldn't be there, so I agreed to let Thelma inside and, I suppose, supervise and watch over her as she worked.

I know Thelma. Actually, what I mean to say is that she cleans here at Eden Heights, the apartment building in which I live. I recognize the faces of almost all the black women cleaning in the building. In fact, all the cleaning women are black. They start work at 7 a.m. Soon after their start time they collect trash from bins located on each floor of the high-rise. I recognize the rattle of the bins; it's almost like a morning wake-up call. The women break for lunch between 12:30 p.m. and 1:30 p.m. and they finish at 4 p.m.

One cleaner, a short woman with bow legs and skin the color of dark chocolate, is an *izangoma*, or diviner. I once shared the elevator with her when she was on her way out of the building after a day's work. I recognized her true calling by the flowing wig of white beads and the dried goat's bladder worn on her head. Diviners are called by their ancestors to the profession, and their headdress speaks eloquently of the supernatural powers that allow them to diagnose illness and misfortune. During work hours, the cleaner doesn't wear the regalia. Seeing it on her indicated to me that she derives "sight" and power from something other than the meager wage she earns.

On another occasion I rode the elevator with the building's chief window washer, a heavyset woman whose labor allows residents to view the Indian Ocean through stain-free glass. "Sawubona," I said to her. To the white people in the elevator, I said: "Good morning." The window cleaner cut her eyes at me and retorted, "Good morning," as if to express her disdain at me for treating her different from others by speaking to her in her language.

Thelma is assigned to clean the 13th floor; my flat is 1302, so I see her more often than the other women. My neighbor told me that Thelma is unmarried and has no children. "But she supports and takes care of her sister's children," the neighbor said. "At the end of every month she goes to see the children in Zululand...takes home a mere pittance to them."

Thelma walked past me, gave a quick "hello," and took off a pair of brown leather sandals before heading for my neighbor's kitchen. She was dressed in the standard blue uniform that all maids in South Africa wear. In the kitchen she pulled Handy

Andy, Vim and other cleaners from a cabinet underneath the sink.

My eyes fixed on the shoes. They looked identical to a pair my mother bought me when she visited last summer. I remembered that we found them at a trendy shop at a Point Road shopping mall called The Wheel. They cost R110 (then about U.S.\$35) I threw them away more than three weeks ago.

I flopped down in a soft chair and, after a split second or so, my attention turned from the sandals. I listened to a mother on radio give testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The tearful mother described how she felt when she set eyes on the charred body of her son, who was allegedly burned to death by rival political activists on July 26, 1985. "I was unable to control myself," the mother said.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created by an act of parliament, namely the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act. The main objective of the commission is that it will help heal deep hurts of the past. It is further hoped that all South Africans will emerge cleansed and purged of past political hostilities, creating an environment conducive for reconciliation.

In the background I could hear Thelma washing the tub. Every few seconds, too, I kept thinking about the sandals.

How could Thelma afford those sandals?

Maybe the woman earns enough to buy sandals that cost R110.

Maybe she bought them on sale.

Maybe, they're my shoes. Surely, Thelma didn't dig them out of the trash. Can't be!

I was distracted by the voice on the radio, which broke down. The mother sobbed and choked on words that described her son and another student allegedly burned to death with him. "They were pitch-black," she said. "Their faces were unrecognizable."

I could now see Thelma out of the corner of my eye. She had finished cleaning the bathroom and was busy straightening up the bedroom, sweeping the carpet and folding clothes strewn all over the bed. I rose from the chair, turned up the volume on the radio and walked to the kitchen to prepare lunch for Thelma.

I've been here long enough to know that it's usual for "madams" to give their maids thick slices of buttered bread or bread filled with a sliver of jam for

lunch. But the neighbor was not present. I was.

I opened the refrigerator, poked around inside and pulled out sliced ham, cheese, lettuce and tomato. I washed the lettuce, patted it dry with a paper towel and laid the crisp leaves on the buttered bread. Next I folded the rectangular-shaped slice of ham, so that it fit neatly within the edges of the brown bread. Then I topped the ham with shavings of cheddar cheese.

As I made the sandwich thoughts filled my head; it was as if my mind were a boat taking on more water than I could possibly bail out. Thelma popped into my mind. There she was mopping hallways, waxing the lobby floor, wiping the outside of apartment windows, hauling the garbage that residents place in bins.

Mixed with the image of Thelma was an image of my mother's hands. Her hands cleaned other people's houses and took care of other people's children. So did my mother's sisters, my aunts; my mother's aunts, my great aunts; my mother's grandmothers, my great grandmothers. I thought of myself, female cousins, and the fact that we are the first generation of women in my family's 200 years in America not to have worked as either domestics or nannies.

I thought about my great great grandmother, Lucinda, a slave. I found her bequeathed in a will dated 1855 to the children of her "madam." Lucinda was 70 then. What if there had been a truth and reconciliation commis-

sion during America's period of Reconstruction, I pondered. What if America had experienced "a spiritual cleansing," lent its ear to the voices of collective anguish, no matter on which side one stood. What if Lucinda's owners had acknowledged that it was wrong to enslave her and said, "We're sorry." And what if Lucinda had answered, "Apology accepted." What if together, they'd sat down and worked out a way to help each other to move forward as people and as members of a common society with a common destiny? Maybe then blacks and whites would not be so bitterly divided on so many issues in America after all these generations. If only we had buried our past and reconciled, there wouldn't be so much dissension among American people today.

From a kitchen drawer, I pulled out a plastic bag and put the ham sandwich wrapped in foil inside it, along with a pear and a chocolate chip cookie. I opened a bottle of Sprite and poured a glass for Thelma. The dust whipped up from sweeping the carpet had made her cough and sneeze.

Thelma held out her right hand to accept the glass, supporting it with her left, as is Zulu custom. After taking a few swallows, she stepped into the kitchen,

"As I made the sandwich thoughts filled my head; it was as if my mind were a boat taking on more water than I could possibly bail out."

filled a bucket with water and fell to her knees to scrub the floor with an old rag.

I turned and walked back to the chair, but paused near the sandals. I wanted to pick them up, examine them, see if they were mine. But I also felt sneaky. What difference did it make if the woman pulled the shoes from the garbage bin? If they're my old sandals, the sole underneath the right toe will be worn down. I listened to hear if Thelma remained on her knees, scrubbing. Then I picked up the right shoe.

The mother on the radio asked the Commission for two things: to use its powers to probe how her son died and for money to bury him. "I should have some money so I can make a dignified funeral for my child," she wept.

Thelma scurried to place three mats back on the

clean kitchen floor. I glanced at a clock on the wall and saw that it was exactly 1:30 p.m., time for her to leave this sideline job and get back to her main one. Hurriedly, she placed her right hand on the back of a dining room chair to balance herself while putting the brown leather sandals on her feet. I handed her the lunch I'd made and R10. She slightly lowered her head, thanked me and left swiftly through the door. As I watched her dash down the passageway, the boat that was my mind overflowed. I then realized that I could have been in Thelma's shoes — as she is now in mine.

Sincerely,



Institute Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey and Central Asia, and their importance as actors the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. [sub-SAHARA]

John Harris. A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John reverted to international studies after a year of internship in

the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

John B. Robinson. A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Brown University, he and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland. He will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]

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