

**"Return"****Denis Beckett**

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**W**hen she left for Australia, Joy cited all the regular reasons, crime and decline and Africa's uncertainties. She got a nice job in Sydney, and lots of peace and security, and nobody stole the paper from public toilets, never mind the seats.

But Joy's six siblings in Jo'burg made much reason for many visits. From time to time she'd get a sense that in South Africa she felt the sun on her face in a warmer way.

She kept it quiet, of course. Men in white coats would come. Aus was for The Chosen..

One day Joy and her laaitie, Luke, were at the jungle-gym at the Zoo Lake. This is a very individual jungle gym. It didn't come out of a box, with plastic fittings. It came out of a forest, big solid logs. It's the gorilla of jungle gyms, a cousin of the army's combat training courses, high on opportunity for kids to break arms and bash heads.

Luke was nervous. This was a fearsome thing, after the park at home in Sydney. That park was lawsuit proof, waxed and pasteurised and shrinkwrapped, certified safety precautions at every hinge.

But as he got into it Joy noticed a strange thing: he was having more fun. In fact, she was having more fun too.

She was enjoying this pre-waxed Africa-type park, and enjoying Luke enjoying it. Also, people greeted Luke, and greeted her, and talked to her, *sommer*, as in "a stranger's a friend you do not know". In the waxed world, thought Joy, that was stuff you heard in church. To walk up in a spirit of "hullo, friend I do not know" ... you'd get a harassment charge.

On a train in Cape Town an old man befriended Luke, like a grandad, sharing sweets and games, as if Joy wasn't there. And the conductor ad libbed. Each time he called the route he gave her a wink and a last line like

"and enjoy the ride." It struck Joy that if his Aussie counterpart broke the rules like that, there'd be disciplinary hearings.

A touring black school group and their teacher include Luke as an honorary member. Joy asks the teacher why. She's implying: "he pays you no fees and no bonus, why should you bother?" She's also implying, deeper down: "and what is more he's not even your, um, race". The teacher replies: "children are our future". Full stop.

Joy returns to Aus. After a year there, she tallies how many strangers interacted with Luke. Answer = two. In South Africa, she reckons, it'd be hundreds, mainly of course blacks, the pastmasters, but some of the pale lot as well. That was a thing about SA's new freedoms; the whites were picking up the good habits of Africa, by osmosis.

Joy mumbles about a return to SA. Everybody says *What! You crazy?* Not only the Aussies say that, so do Seffricans. She feels very alone. Is she crazy? Someone points her to [www.homecomingrevolution.co.za](http://www.homecomingrevolution.co.za), and she's astounded. *Lots* of South Africans are going home. That fortifies her, but people say: "To indulge yourself you're inflicting crime and decline and dead-end-for-whites on your innocent son." She says: "No, that's exactly wrong, it's *for* my son, so he can grow up enriched by the human connectivity of Africa." The chorus: *What! You crazy?*

Joy knows she's right, in her bones, but damn, she's scared. The chorus says: "at least put him in private school". She can't afford it. Everyone insists a SA government school will doom Luke to placards on street corners. She nearly chickens out. Then her Jo'burg teacher friend Dale phones to say "you're hearing junk, you want to be here, block your ears and get here." She did.

Last week Luke's government school asked Joy if she could do transport, for an outing. She burst into tears. They were surprised. She explained. She'd love to help with transport. She wasn't allowed, before. Only designated buses and certified drivers carry Aus school outings. No cowboy stuff like Mom's Taxi.

"I realised", says Joy, "that I like the cowboy stuff. I like a world with loose ends. I like a world that isn't all comfort zone. And I like being required to give. It's not ideal that so many are in need, but for me it's better to have to give than to never give. You think bigger."

You do, hey. You think frinstance that we may never be the world's richest country or continent, or the calmest, or even the kings of the pitch. But heck, we can be the nicest.



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