

Letters from the New World

#2: "Walk Tall"

Denis Beckett

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In 1973 no-one was as non-apartheid as we all now like to think we were. Hiring the Smuts farm at Irene for a black staff picnic was a mission. Blacks? Little old United Party people in Moth badges wrung hands for weeks. They talked about "the natives", and "raising expectations".

But people were moving forward, groping, in that way they do. Permission was finally granted, subject to a stack of promises and guarantees nine yards high.

And everything went fine. Until lunchtime in the meat queue, when Walk Tall got aggrieved. In his view he'd been given an undersize portion, by a little old UP lady.

As the name suggests, Walk Tall was a toughie, a towering strong guy with attitude. He was also afloat in ingested substances. He drew a knife as long as a thigh, and informed the lady that he would cut off her ears to make up his protein.

At this point, you can imagine, picnic day came a little unstuck. Monday morning Walk Tall was contrite as well as hung over. I was sorry to sack him; normally he was a dynamo, and full of personality. But he had to go.

Fast forward 15 years. I'm in Anderson street, back end of town. On foot. It's winter, it's dusk, the air is thick with smoke. I'm alone, very alone. I'm vulnerable.

Suddenly there's a gang around me. Instantly, I know this is farewell to my possessions. Perhaps it's farewell to blood and breath too. Then I see that one of them is Walk Tall. My heart clangs on the tar. Day of vengeance! I telepath goodbyes to my loved ones.

Walk Tall stares, holding his pals back. Then he roars out my name. To my astonishment he's not roaring in fury, but in tones you'd use for a long-lost brother. He grabs me – I get a close-up of a wicked blade, sideways on – and smothers me with a huge hug.

I'm introduced to the pals. Knives vanish and all four walk me to the Carlton Hotel. **"You can't walk alone!" says Walk Tall. "There are bad people here!"**

On route he says he hasn't had a job since I fired him. Once in the Carlton's light I risk the question: doesn't he perhaps bear ever so slight a bit of, uh, anger?

Walk Tall cracks up like I've made a great joke. "What! Angry! At you! No, you had to fire me! And you shook my hand!" The gang returns to the night, waving.

Fast forward again, 12 years to 2000. Walk Tall re-appears. He has adventure stories that make Sinbad look stay-at-home. He also has a shining moral high point of his career, viz, having not killed me. His reasons have become complex enough to baffle Freud, wild flights into love and hate and black pride and conquering demons. But the outcome is clear. He has come to see Not Killing Beckett as a Nobel-deserving achievement, or at minimum worthy of eternal thanks.

I mention the mundane fact that six billion other people have also, to date, not killed me, but he is unfazed. He says 5 999 999 999 never had to do anything to not kill me; he alone stayed the knife. It is a bit different, I grant, but no way am I in lifelong debt because he aborted a crime he should never have started. He shakes his head, saddened that such callous ingratitude exists.

That subject remains an impasse, though we've tried several times to work it out. Once was on radio where he spoke grippingly about crime and white victims, the mugger's eye view. People couldn't stop listening. One guy missed a plane.

Having latched on to the high ground, Walk Tall has made it his life. You can practically see the halo. But this old world is full of rabbit

punches. A year ago he got a job. A month ago he was told to take certain steps in re a collectable debt. In his old incarnation these steps were well in the day's work. But this is the new moral Walk Tall. He says "I don't do assault", and he quits.

And who gets the rap? Yeah, right. Me. "You're the one who told me to stop doing crime, and I listened to you so now I have nothing to eat."

He hopes I'll cough up in return for my unpunctured ribcage. I've told him to forget that, but another factor grows: all those parables about mercy and lost sheep and returned prodigals. Isn't that how we're supposed to live, giving a chance to a guy who reforms? Why do all the reformed sheep I see seem to be staring at slammed doors? Somewhere there's an employer-type person who believes in reformed characters or in happy endings or in both, and who might communicate with (the name on the ID), at (Joburg address.)



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