The Prettiest Town in South Africa

"It was cold by Salt River on Tuesday, mists of ghosts keeping me company as I shivered myself into being beautifully alive. I thought that it may be the last day of Winter, a desperate gasp to hold onto us before the flowers of Spring took over, singing, 'We live on the Garden Route, we live in Knysna, the prettiest town in South Africa."

- Mike Hampton

The social and power dynamics of a small town is different to a city. If you live in one, you probably know what I mean. Hell, cause my nickname from the Durban underground music scene was 'Wicked Mike', and I preferred the practicality of wearing black clothes, several Knysna folk asked me if I was a Satanist. They never seemed to believe me when I said, "No." If only politics were so funny.

Some people have more power than anything possible if they were somewhere bigger. And woe to us if they're stupid or selfish, a combination being the bigger damage.

Whereas a white person with limited swagger in a city suburb might become the prima donna at the local tennis club, they could become a Mayor in a place like Knysna. It's quite easy to have no leadership abilities and record of social service yet become a councillor because you chose a certain social circle and one political party in particular – the DA. It's unsurprising that a lack of competency and empathy often accompanies.

I say "white person" because black politicians tend to run on rage at what their poorer neighbours haven't got. Have no doubt, they've got a lot to yell about with Apartheid having screwed them and their African National Congress (ANC) liberators having failed them, but that's not my point here. A black politician is more likely to have a long political history in their community whereas a white Democratic Alliance (DA) politician is more likely, as example, to be a failed estate agent needing a salary to keep up their social wine drinking. In the case of Knysna, that seems to be a true story.

Sure, the DA has black politicians too but there's fair argument for that being tokenism in order to win more power from the biggest market. It's political capitalism, the DA being a retailer wanting the majority of the population to buy its product. And they're willing to deliver a weaker product for a quick profit. It's like a manufacturer dropping potato crisps from 150g to 125g per packet, and then selling one flavour at the original weight as if it were on special. The consumer is conned. Have no doubt that you, the citizen, are the fucking consumer.

I have a problem with the DA promoting colour from nowhere instead of building
experience that will benefit our country longer than a smash and grab. By now, the DA should have given us strong black and coloured liberal leaders. Instead, they shoved white hands up non-white arses to dance to populism and socialism whilst speaking in liberal contradiction.

Yes, I'm purposely generalising but not intentionally pissing everyone off. Unfortunately, racial stereotyping plays a part in understanding South Africa, especially Knysna where white people rule with the assistance of higher ranked coloured people (whose culture seems more white than black). Think of it as adult contemporary pop versus kwainto with R&B stuck in between. Only those who aim a middle finger at an obviously broken system are rock 'n rollers.

Social demographics matter. Emphasising the difference is that the white population is in decline, only 9.1% nationwide yet 21% in Knysna. That's because retirees, with the means to relocate, love Knysna. They should. I consider it to be the prettiest town, as is of repeated by Brits, Germans and Dutch (who've travelled the world).

None can deny the beauty of a low-tide walk from Lake Brenton to the Western Head where, along the way, you delight in storks, cormorants and Egyptian geese. Small beaches with their own identities offer a unique view across the water to the Knysna Waterfront, Thesen Islands and Leisure Island. Then there's summer sunsets at Bollard Bay, clambering the ragged rocks of Coney Glen, riding a boat on the Knysna Estuary, descending the long stairs down a cliff into Jaap se Baai, sand in your toes at Gericke's Point or Buffalo Bay, watching fish jump out of the river in Sedgefield, pastoral wonders on the 7 Passes Road, the Outeniqua Mountains peering like grandfather down on Katatara, friendly buck at Brenton-on-Sea and startlingly beautiful Loerie birds red-winging between the trees in search of yellow berries. Forests, estuaries, rivers and beaches makes Knysna almost fantasy. It’s attracted painters and musicians. It perfectly understandable that many choose to retire there.

But the Credit Card Boom created American-styled holiday homes in gated communities. Then the 2008 global recession made them as beautiful as bees on the flowers of weeds. Although some owners tumbled, unable to afford to pay for their trip to their holiday home, the allure of Knysna ensured they were replaced. Knysna simultaneously got richer whilst the majority got poorer.

Retirees, middle to upper class, and the rich in need of a playground, ensured an older, whiter and more conservative population for Knysna. As their names are unknown, their skin and politics is also unknown, but its remarkable that it was
reported that this little place has 13 residents worth more than R300-million (with 10 more living in Plettenberg Bay, a mere 30km away). Knysna's property market has been compared to Clifton in Cape Town, amongst the most luxuriously desired in the country. Gill Marcus, the ex-Governor of the South African Reserve Bank, lives here. The debate over banning fireworks is an example of Knysna's minority power. “Don't fuck with out chihuahuas” proved more powerful than “Don't fuck with our culture.”

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Unlike the cities, the inequality between the have and have-nots isn't hidden. Journalist Ingrid Erlank summed up the contrast: “There is literally a rocket scientist with millions in the bank living less than a kilometre away from someone that boils stones so that her kids can go to sleep thinking there is food cooking. This a place where we are challenged by the true reality of our world.”

The poor have a view of the rich from the northern hills, and town centre is only a five to ten-minute taxi ride away. Likewise, I’ve met white people who've never been into the townships, or claim kudos because they sometimes drop their maids off.

There are exceptions, wonderful people in every community, especially the charity sector (which is strong in Knysna), but I'm trying to present to you how things are in the bigger picture, not in the microcosm, and not how I want them to be.

Overall, it's a culture clash, a town divided without truly knowing itself.

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I'm not saying most white people are rich – they're not. There's a big difference between the mega rich, the retiree, the worker and the unemployed. Most survive on appalling wages made smaller by escapism in bars (which isn't criticism because I'd like nothing more than to have a Windhoek or Mitchell's beer with some of them right now).

The recession changed Knysna forever. Small business owners closed and left. Homes and guest houses got bonded.

Young people still finish school at a running pace towards a city or a university far away from the battle for the best waitron job in a restaurant that will get the most people for 2 weeks in July or December, when Knysna is a prime tourist destination.

So, for those that are left, no matter colour, getting a well-paid job in local government is the holy grail.
There are rare exceptions but rich Whites tend not to run for office, instead exerting influence on the town, mostly in support for the DA which is viewed as the anti-corruption party against the corruption of the ANC. No matter how multi-racial the DA claims to be, there are still many white people who vote for them because of “die swart gewaar”, the fear of black people one day slaughtering them.

Property development is also primarily the domain of white folk. It's reasonable to consider the possibility that those failed estate agents who become politicians could carry relevant bias. In the 8 years I've been an activist, that's included a Mayor, Deputy Mayor, District Councillor and Proportional Councillor (who joined the Mayoral Committee) - all DA. One property developer failed at his run for office via the ACDP. Another became the town planner. Maybe not all nefarious but also to do with the fact that politics and property are both a salesperson's game.

The way forward is to realise what we have in common, to express empathy and action towards the struggles of others, and to acknowledge the contributions made. If you're South African, you probably laughing at the possibility, not because you don't want it be that way but because you've repeatedly witnessed the opposite on television. That most of us don't consider race as our biggest worry doesn't matter. On the fringes, hate speech, racist and xenophobic, is a growth product. And the politicians are always guaranteed to take advantage of it.

So you'd expect there'd be a major fight in the Knysna Council, the local body comprised of politicians called “councillors”. However, more often than not, it's in hollow words only. Once they're in the same bed, they'll tell the Public that there's no money to fix potholes whilst unanimously voting to increase their own pay. Ideologies vanish, replaced with personal greed and cross-party faction fighting that has got nothing to do with the health of the Public they're supposed to serve.

That, in part, likely had something to do with the 2018 assassination of ANC Chief Whip Victor Molosi. But that'll have to wait for the next book.

What happened, and is still happening in Knysna, is that the well-being of councillors and their cronies is placed before the rights of the Public.

When Knysna was taken over by the DA in 2011, I felt positive about it. Following years turned that feeling upside down and me inside out. I discovered the abuse of Public funds, turned to the DA leadership for help, only to discover they were the bigger enemy. Consequently, I became an activist. And their biggest critic as I
discovered more and more of their corruption. Their response was to unconstitutionally block my emails. Their response was to lay crimen injuria and harassment charges against me, and repeatedly take me to court to try break me. They tried to bribe me, they threatened me. And when that didn't work, they launched a lengthy social media propaganda campaign against me, associating me with child abuse and sociopathy.

The story begins with Knysna Tourism, a private company annually granted millions without tender by the Knysna Municipality. In turn, Knysna Tourism would give who they wanted work, without tender and generally without contract. It did so whilst politicians and municipal staff were on its Board of Directors and on its committees.

It was a cash cow for favouritism, ironically invaluable as it began unravelling the real DA.
The stunning Knysna Estuary at low tide and with the Outeniqua Mountains as backdrop