

# ColdType Section Two

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## CANADA

Writing an obituary is a delicate artform. **Warren Gerard** offers some carefully-chosen words of advice for new practitioners

# Writes of passage

**P**ierre Berton, the indefatigable 81-year-old author, journalist and showman, perhaps contemplating his own inevitable demise, wrote a column in *The Toronto Star* on September 10, 1994, decrying the clichés of bad obituary writing.

“According to accepted newspaper clichés, we all go down fighting,” Berton wrote. “The other day I even read that an 18-month-old baby had died after a long battle with cancer.”

“That has become the mandatory phrase for all who expire, disease-ridden. They battled valiantly; they lost. When I finally depart I hope somebody will write, instead, that I died after a long battle with life.”

Berton is quite right about clichés in obituary writing. They abound. And often, it seems, dead is a word to be avoided. It has been left to morticians rather than linguists to create euphemisms to soften the ultimate last word, including departed, went home, called away, passed away or passed on, sometimes when asleep, other times suddenly, peacefully, or unexpectedly.

At most newspapers, obits are written by the unfortunate, usually older reporters who have developed varicose minds or the cub reporter pressed into service.

Hugh Massingberd, the celebrated obituary writer for the *Daily Telegraph*, now retired, awaiting death, recalled that when he took the job his colleagues looked upon him with a mixture of pity and contempt.

“Evidently I had taken leave of a never notably firm grip on my senses,” he wrote in *Book Of Obituaries: A Celebration Of Eccentric Lives*. “Why was I masochistically immersing myself in the esoteric obscurity of such a dreary, stagnant backwater?” Massingberd was not to be deterred, however, and for several years his fortunate readers were

exposed to funny, charmingly deadpan obits of the eccentric English.

“A sympathetic acceptance of someone’s foibles is surely the object of the exercise,” he wrote. “I would far rather be remembered with guffaws of sorely exasperated affection concerning my bizarre shortcomings than with the customary crocodile tears of the po-faced mourner.”

In Massingberd’s obits, coded understatement became the golden rule. A notorious crook, for example, might be judged “not to have upheld the highest ethical standards of the City.”

And someone “not suffering fools gladly” was a curmudgeon. Convivial meant a drunk. A great raconteur was a crashing bore, and relishing physical contact described a sadist.

His writing was subtle, cool and distanced. This was taken from the obit on Liberace, who was unmarried: “Perhaps to lend himself an air of ruggedness with which nature had not chosen to endow him, he adopted the stage name of Walter Busterkeys when he embarked on his early career.” And later in the obit, Massingberd observed the pianist’s “private tastes were steeped in an absence of sobriety. His master bedroom was painted with a re-creation of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, his lawn was centrally heated, his swimming pool was piano-shaped and among his possessions — or happy-happies as he liked to call them — was a piano made out of 10,000 toothpicks.”

**F**or the most part, obituaries tend not to speak ill of the dead. A prime example is *Lives Lived*, a lovingly worded one-column obituary on a back page in Toronto’s *Globe*



Dušan Petricic

and Mail. They are written by a relative or friend and are forgiveably one-sided, seeing only the best side, not mentioning the other.

A trend, particularly south of the border, is the self-authored, self-important obit. More people are writing their own obits and paying to have them published in the local paper.

The Second Great Obituary Writers' Conference, held last year in Jefferson, Texas, came up with this self-authored masterpiece written by Robert Fiddes Alexander, a Dallas journalist.

*"Well, it appears that the pipe finally nailed me. But I enjoyed every aromatic puff of it for over 50 years. My only regret is leaving my wife Shirley and our family some 20 years earlier than planned."*

And later in the obit he revealed:

*"People ask how I came to Texas. As I recall, it was in a 1948 Chevrolet. I've enjoyed it here. My first job was as a copy boy for the Morning News, then as a reporter on the business news desk. I well remember my first story. This will be my last."*

It's no surprise that Alexander's obit didn't appear in the *New York Times*. "Our obituaries are not about writing eulogies. That's for somebody else, or you can take out an ad," says Charles Strum, obituary editor for the *Times*.

He has impressive resources, making his colleagues at other newspapers envious. Strum spends most of his time assigning obituaries on personalities who are nearing the end of their lives, so that the paper isn't caught off guard.

His deputy mainly looks after the daily obits, written on deadline. In all, the paper has six full-time obituary writers, as well as four writers on contract who are former foreign and national correspondents, and a number of freelancers as well.

A *Times* obit quite often includes a less than laudatory fact. One example can be found in the obituary on Anton Rosenberg, who merited attention because he was best known as the model for the character Julian Alexander in Jack Kerouac's novel, *The Subterraneans*. The lead read:

**"You take a fellow who looks like a goat, travels around with goats, eats with goats, lies down among goats and smells like a goat and it won't be long before people will be calling him the Goat Man"**

*This article was first published in The Toronto Sunday Star*

*"Anton Rosenberg, a storied sometime artist and occasional musician who embodied the Greenwich Village hipster ideal of 1950s cool to such a laid-back degree and with such determined detachment that he never amounted to much of anything, died on Feb.14 ..."*

Rosenberg's obituary is one of 52 in a book titled *52 McGs.*, a wonderful collection by Robert McGill Thomas Jr., a *New York Times* reporter, now dead.

Many of his obits were not about the famous. Rather, they were about unusual people, such as Charles McCartney, who was known for his travels with goats. He died at 97, and his obit started this way:

*"You take a fellow who looks like a goat, travels around with goats, eats with goats, lies down among goats and smells like a goat and it won't be long before people will be calling him the Goat Man."*

Or this one:

*"Francine Katzenbogen, a Brooklyn-born lottery millionaire who loved cats so much she worked tirelessly for animal adoption agencies, donated generously to their support and housed 20 beloved strays in luxury at her own suburban Los Angeles mansion, died on Oct.30 at her home in Studio City. She was 51 and may have loved cats more than was good for her."*

On occasion, Thomas clashed with editors who tried to rein in his sentences. "Of course I go too far," he was quoted in his own obituary. "But unless you go too far, how are you ever going to find out how far you can go?"

Perhaps an even better known obit writer at the *Times* was the late Alden Whitman. In his tenure, Whitman initiated a new approach to the art by interviewing his subjects in advance of their deaths. He travelled around the world and interviewed leaders in all fields – politics, arts, science, sports and crime.

He admitted to another writer, Gay Talese, that preparing an advance obit causes occupational astigmatism. "Alden Whitman has discovered," Talese wrote, "that in his brain have become embalmed several people who are alive, or were at last look, but whom

he is constantly referring to in the past tense."

Whitman, who wore a cloak, had a sepulchre laugh and possessed the look of the reaper, promised his subjects he would not reveal what they told him until after their deaths. His approach brought him a certain notoriety, but there were those who sought an interview with Whitman and others who would call him to update their lives.

He had one such interview with Harry S. Truman. The two quickly got to the point, and Whitman reported after Truman's death that the former U.S. president said: "I know why you're here, and I want to help you all I can."

In some cases, interviewing someone before death has advantages – in setting the record straight, that is. "In the case of a political leader of any stripe," Strum points out, "local, national or foreign, you run the risk of having revisionist history thrown in your lap."

Nevertheless, whether the subject was interviewed or not, Whitman defined what was needed for an exemplary obit. It should be a "lively expression of personality and character as well as a conscientious exposition of the main facts of a person's life," he wrote. "A good obit has all the characteristics of a well-focused snapshot, the fuller the length the better. If the snapshot is clear, the viewer gets a quick fix on the subject, his attainments, his shortcomings and his time."

Fitting that description, perhaps, is a paragraph from *The Star's* obit on former prime minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, who died Sept.28, 2000:

*"He was enigmatic, the least civil of our leaders, confrontational, a philosophical gunslinger with a rose in his lapel, an authoritarian prime minister whose cabinet members held him in high esteem and some measure of fear, a ladies man, a penny-pinching millionaire who wasn't at all miserly with the public purse, a princely performer who made the world his stage. He pirouetted behind the Queen's back, slid down banisters, danced in Sheik Yamani's desert tent, wore sandals in the House of Commons, gave the finger to protesters, told parliamentarians to fuddle duddle, and often expressed himself with an arrogant, dismissive shrug."*

Trudeau's obit was prepared weeks in advance of his death, just as hundreds of others are stored in a computer file ready for updating, editing and publication.

One of those – as he well knows – is a lengthy obit on Pierre Berton. It starts:

*"The indefatigable writer, Pierre Berton, died yesterday "after a long battle with life." ♦*

Warren Gerard wrote many high-profile obituaries in his career as a journalist at *The Toronto Star*. Article reprinted courtesy *The Toronto Star Syndicate*

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## C U B A



# Branding Cuba: La Vida Nike

*The USA media is wondering what will happen to the communist enclave just a few miles off its coast after Castro's reign ends. Too late, says **Michael I. Niman** – the revolution has already begun*

**F**ace it – America is obsessed with its communist island neighbor to the south. Since its revolution in 1959, Cuba periodically takes centre-stage in the American psyche. Take May, for instance. In preparation for Jimmy Carter's long-anticipated visit to the island, George W. Bush, with great media fanfare, inaugurated Cuba into his "Axis of Evil." A week later, Carter made history as the first American president, sitting or former, to visit the island since Calvin Coolidge.

With Carter came the American press corps, agog with a freshly invigorated curiosity. Once again the land of Che Guevara, Fidel Castro and Elian Gonzalez is lighting up television screens across the American heartland and once again the American media is examining our relationship with our

**Havana is one of the world's most vibrant cities, yet it didn't have a single commercial billboard**

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island neighbor – only now, a main focus is on when, not if, the United State will re-establish trade with Cuba.

My experience in Cuba tells me the media is behind the curve. American businesses have already established a beachhead and are impatiently waiting to break from the starting gate in a race to stake a claim in a new consumerist Cuba. The Cubans, for their part, won't know what hit them.

My first trip to Cuba was in 1987; a university-sponsored sojourn to the forbidden island "behind the iron curtain." My odyssey began in Toronto as I boarded a vintage Russian-made IL 62. The plane, prohibited from flying over the U.S., headed to the Atlantic Ocean and then made a sharp right turn, depositing us in Havana's Jose Marti airport at about midnight. I looked out the window

at the dimly-lit terminal, expecting to see troops, perhaps statues of Lenin. What I did see was the biggest Visa card I had ever seen, above the words, "Welcome to Cuba."

So much for communism.

Upon leaving the airport, however, we saw no more Visa billboards. Actually there were no billboards touting any product other than the official "revolutionary" ideology of the communist party. Cuba was still a rare advertising- and commercial-free zone. Its stores were filled with generic products. Its culture was yet to be branded.

At the time I didn't appreciate how rare this ad-free experience would prove to be. The following year, as a journalist based in Costa Rica, I hiked deep into the highlands of Guatemala, looking to escape American corporate culture. But alas, a half-day's walk

beyond the last electric wires, in “guerrilla” territory, beyond the reach of government, Coca-Cola and Pepsi were still slugging it out, with Coke reigning supreme. Malnourished campesinos would spend a day’s wages for a warm bottle of Coke, el sabor de la vida Norte Americano.

Cuba was different. Havana is one of the world’s most vibrant cities, yet it didn’t have a single commercial billboard. People began to travel to Cuba for the sole purpose of experiencing a landscape free of commercial clutter. Rebellious Cuban youths would scrawl the names of U.S. and British rock bands onto walls and into fresh concrete as symbols of resistance to state-controlled media. Next to them were peace and anarchist symbols and English words such as “punk” and “metal,” dangling devoid of context. That was 14 years ago.

Today, this graffiti of resistance seems to have morphed into one symbol, the omnipresent Nike swoosh. It’s not just on walls and in the cement, but embroidered by hand onto shirts and hats, stenciled onto car windows and on the backs of pedal-cab bicycle taxis. La Vida Nike has taken Cuba by storm. American culture – in essence corporate consumer culture – has established a citadel in Cuba and seemingly is there to stay.

**B**ut let’s back up. Cuba became commercial free when its government nationalized most foreign businesses in the early 1960s, establishing a so-called communist economy and earning the ire of eight successive U.S. presidents. The Havana Hilton was de-branded and re-christened the Habana Libre. United Fruit and Meyer Lansky’s crime syndicate were both driven from the island. The U.S. State Department, ever quick to protect foreign investments, isolated Cuba with a comprehensive economic embargo that exists intact to this day. U.S. citizens cannot travel to Cuba, trade with Cuba or invest in Cuba. What was supposed to financially starve the Cubans into submission instead pushed them into the fold of the other economic force on the planet, the Soviet Bloc.

Being shunned by the global capitalist powers for a generation, however, really didn’t hurt Cuba. Instead the embargo allowed it to develop into something unique. Without easy access to Western banks and development loans, for example, Cuba evaded the debt crisis that has been crippling the economic development of almost every other Third World country in the hemisphere.

The proverbial shit hit the fan, however, in 1989 with the breakup of the Soviet Union and the destruction of the Eastern European economic bloc, Cuba’s primary trading partner. Suddenly Cuba was without oil, spare parts for vehicles, and also without a market for its major exports such as sugar. Thus began the “special period.” Resourceful Cubans welded old Eastern European busses together into massive trailers, each holding 300 passengers and pulled by South Ameri-



**Without easy access to Western banks and development loans, for example, Cuba evaded the debt crisis that has been crippling the economic development of almost every other Third World country in the hemisphere**

can Ford truck tractors.

Today Cuba has adapted to the special period not only with mechanical ingenuity, but with economic compromise as well. Cuba, once again, is open for business and courting capitalist investment – on its own terms. The government remains a 51 percent partner in most major enterprises on the island. Investors are happy since they are investing in an island-wide monopoly. Without the competition of a free marketplace Cuba offers firms such as Spain’s Sol Melia hotel chain, a company that controls a third of Cuba’s upscale hotel rooms, a safe business climate. Currently the European Union and Canada have replaced the Soviets as Cuba’s primary trading partners.

And with the capitalists back in town come the billboards as Cuba is once again adorned with multinational corporate “art” touting a consumerist message.

With 5.6 percent economic growth, Cuba’s economy is booming, to the benefit of Cuba’s leaders who are forever pleased to thumb their noses at their American tormentors, and also to the profit of international investors who are reaping big returns from Cuba’s mixed economy. Left out of this party are Cuba’s closest neighbors, American businesses still forbidden to trade with the “enemy.” But they’re establishing their beachheads, preparing for the coming commercial invasion of the island. The lure is too strong. Compared to the advertising saturated developed capitalist world, Cuba is an advertising-ready environment – a blank canvas.

The ever-present Nike graffiti is all cultural spillover from the U.S. It’s not Nike that

Cuban rebels are celebrating; it’s a romanticized view of American capitalism, with the Nike swoosh as its most visible logo. It’s on the clothing their gusano relatives send from the States. It’s branded all over tourists. It’s on the clothes tourists give to Cubans at the end of their week-long sojourns.

Young Cuban rebels have adopted the swoosh just as late Cold War-era American youth adopted Mao caps and CCCP logo gear. It’s similar to the use of the Nazi swastika by the 1970s punk movement in the UK – flirting with the enemy; upsetting the establishment. Unlike Mao caps, CCCP gear and swastikas, however, the swoosh is property. It’s a brand. In Cuba it’s currently controlled by the Spanish corporation Cidesport S.A.

In Cuba, where the average monthly wage is less than \$21U.S., Cidesport sells Nike footwear for \$30-70U.S. For the vast majority of Cubans, actual Nikes remain an elusive commodity. For a small minority, the nuevo riche, Cubans who receive money from abroad or who work in the tourist industry and receive tips in U.S. dollars, Cuba’s new preferred currency, Nike products are now available.

The products often come from so-called “communist” countries, China and Viet Nam. A Spanish company sells them to Cubans who pay considerably more than other comparable Chinese and Vietnamese products, with the markup being split between Cidesport and Nike. Nike produces nothing. They simply own the swoosh.

**C**uba, with a population of 11 million, presents both a market and virgin territory for branding. The lure is strong and multinational corporations are jockeying for a piece of culture. While the front door is closed, however, the back door is wide open. U.S. law prohibits small business from trading with Cuba, yet brand-name American products are omnipresent in Cuba. Tourists are chauffeured in Ford and Chrysler vans, restaurants serve Coke and Budweiser, stores sell Marlboro, Winston and Lucky Strikes.

The U.S. State Department, while rhetorically committed to its arcane embargo, also recognises the potential of the Cuban market. Under pressure from U.S.-based corporations, it has been punching big-business friendly loopholes through its own regulations. Starting in 1995, for example, the Clinton Administration allowed U.S. corporations to register trademarks with an eye toward securing a foothold in Cuba. To date, brands such as Hard Rock Cafe, Nutrasweet, Heinz, Gillette, Sbarro, Clairol, Radisson, Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, Warner-Lambert, Calvin Klein, Playboy, DirecTV, Alamo-Rent-A-Car, Conagra, Zippo, MCI, Sara Lee, Monsanto, Pizza Hut, UPS and Wrigley’s gum have stepped up to the plate, registering Cuban trademarks.

The Cuban government has a keen sense of branding and has been taking advantage of its headstart in its own market by branding government-run businesses with corporate-style logos and names. By doing so it has





created its own brands and staked out its own share of the developing Cuban market.

The government began branding in the 1980s by creating names and logos for the upscale state-run dollar stores and restaurants patronized by foreigners. Cubans, who were not allowed to possess dollars until the mid 1990s, were denied access to these businesses. The branding, however, still imprinted upon the population as they peered through the windows with envy, watching tourists buy luxury goods. The tourists themselves became billboards, living props branded by the logo emblazoned shopping bags they toted around Havana. When a tourist discarded a logo bag, Cubans would rush to retrieve it from the trash and then carry it around with pride as a status symbol.

Today these stores are now present throughout Havana, with Cubans being their primary market. Hip and branded, the stores compete effectively with black marketeers, vacuuming dollars out of the Cuban economy and back into the hands of the government. Cubans I spoke with often recommended I eat at a Rumbos restaurant, part of a mock chain of grocery shops and fast-food outlets trusted by Cubans for providing the uniform quality they assume tourists would expect. "The chicken is good, it's Rumbos." Also popular are the government-run El Rapido and Burgui (based on the Burger King model) fast food chains. The Cuban government has also created its own brands of gasoline: Cupet, Cimex and Cubalse.

Cuban-run government businesses are also practicing co-branding with experienced foreign chains. One government-run enterprise, for example, recently entered into an agreement with Pizza Nova, a Toronto restaurant chain similar to the multinationally branded Pizza Hut, to operate a chain of outlets. Currently, with a Pizza Nova meal costing 10 to 20 times the price of a meal at other

Cuban pizzerias, Pizza Nova is in effect a forbidden fruit, with locations only in posh tourist zones. They are well positioned, however, to replace many cheaper pizzerias and to compete effectively with new entries from foreign multinationals. With a state-controlled media, Cubans will have Pizza Nova imprinted upon their culture years before seeing their first seductive Pizza Hut ad.

With proven successes at home, the Cuban government is taking its branding experiment abroad, in effect taking on the multinational branders in their own backyards with their own game. Cubanacan S.A., the Cuban government-owned operator of Cuba's Pizza Novas, in conjunction with the government-owned Gran Caribe S.A. hotel chain, is currently planning to open Cuban cuisine restaurants in Brazil, China, France, Italy, Mexico and Spain, where a licensed branded Cuban Tropicana nightclub has existed since 1994.

Advertisements for embargoed Cuban goods have also started appearing in the U.S. press. The July 2000 issue of *Forbes* and the spring 2000 issue of *Ritz Carleton* magazine both featured ads for Cuban cigars that are currently illegal in the U.S. The July 2000 issue of *Conde Nast Traveler* and the June 2000 issue of *Cigar Aficionado* featured ads for travel to Cuban resorts.

Cuba's overseas branding experiment, however, is miniscule compared to the interest multinationals have in branding Cuba. Currently over 110 U.S.-based businesses, almost all of which are multinational corporations, are licensed by the U.S. State Department to do business in Cuba. The list includes Alcoa, AT&T, Corning and Owens Corning, Coleman, Champion Spark Plugs, Del Monte, Dow, Dupont, Lilly, Exxon, Ford, GE, Goodyear, GTE, Bridgestone Firestone, Honeywell, Johnson & Johnson, Litton, Monsanto, RCA, Raytheon and Upjohn. The government, still desperate for dollars, has thrown the door open to foreign investment,

**With a state-controlled media, Cubans will have Pizza Nova imprinted upon their culture years before seeing their first seductive Pizza Hut ad**

inviting in some of the very corporations that have been vilified for decades in the Cuban media. Cuba is an original signatory to the GATT Treaty and is a member of the WTO. Both GATT and the WTO guarantee branding rights and protections to foreign investors.

U.S. businesspeople are flocking to Cuba. In 1994, 500 U.S. business executives traveled to Cuba "on business." That number increased three-fold to 1,500 in 1996, to 2,500 in 1998 and to 3,400 in the year 2000. Dollar stores in Cuba currently sell, among other brands, Campbell Soup, Heinz, Del Monte, Libby's, Kraft, La Choy, Bumble Bee, Progresso, Planter's, Hellman's, Gerber, Uncle Ben's, Motts, Ragu, Tabasco, A-1, Vlasic, Purina and Mars. The Pepsi and Coca-Cola brands had a monopoly on diet soft-drinks in Cuba until 2000 when Nestle entered the market.

AOL Time/Warner executives recently traveled to Cuba to discuss both the import and the export of TV programming and movies. Business leaders and politicians from Illinois and Georgia visited to explore business opportunities such as introducing the Churches and Popeye's Fried Chicken and Cinnibons brands to the island. Executives from Daimler-Chrysler recently won a \$200 million contract to provide busses to Cuba.

The year 2000 saw the "U.S. Healthcare Exhibition" in Havana. Companies marginally in the healthcare business promoted brands such as Eastman Kodak, Kimberly-Clark, Kendall, Monsanto and the Proctor & Gamble family of brands. Cubans lined up for free samples of Vicks lozenges.

Currently, Marlboro Cigarettes typifies Cuba's branded future. New York-based Philip Morris Companies (newly re-named Altria), Marlboro's parent corporation, is conducting Cuba's most successful branding experiment. Using techniques ranging from a sophisticated display at Havana's Food and Beverages International Trade Fair, to the distribution of its omnipresent branded ashtrays in Cuban restaurants, Philip Morris has boosted Cuban Marlboro sales to between four and five million packs per year.

The U.S. Cuba Trade and Economic Council reports that Marlboro cigarettes are usually difficult to find in Cuba as they tend to sell out, even at premium prices where an average weekly salary buys two packs, as soon as they are displayed. Other brands, they note, are always available.

When it comes to branding Cuba, Nike and Marlboro are the clear champions. They have commodified American ideals of rebellion and individualism and packaged them for Cuban consumption.

What the Cubans get, however, is neither revolution nor individualism, just conformity and a return to pre-revolutionary corporate domination. ♦

Michael I. Niman will become a professor of journalism at Buffalo State College in the fall of 2002. He is the author of "People of the Rainbow: A Nomadic Utopia" (Univ. of Tennessee Press).



ANGOLA

# Hard men, hard country

*South African writer Rian Malan goes on the road with some of the toughest truckers on the planet*

**E**ric Gagiano is a battler from way back, a tough guy from a frontier town where Saturday nights are for drinking and fighting and just looking at an oke the wrong way is enough to get your ribs kicked in.

In his wild youth, Eric was the terror of farm dances and sakkie-sakkie jols all across the old Suid-Wes, so widely dreaded that his enemies eventually jumped him in the alley behind the Otjiwarongo Hotel and beat him up with fence droppers, leaving him with a pulverised cheekbone and an eye that droops lazily, like the TV detective Colombo's.

After that came a stint on the border, where he fought "terrorists," and a spell on a cattle ranch near Etosha, where he fought marauding lions. These days, he fights bad roads, bandits and chaos in Angola, which is why he's sitting in the cab of a 40-ton truck at Santa Clara border post, waiting.

You do a lot of waiting in Angola. You wait for cops, for customs officers and border guards, for bandits to be cleared off the road ahead. Right now, Eric (48) and his son Mannetjie (21) are waiting for the third vehicle in their convoy, a pickup stuck on the far side of the border on account of a flaw in its papers.

Santa Clara has the feel of a frontier town in the old Wild West. The bars and whore-

**There are several crates of cheap whiskey on the trailer, to be dispensed as bribes to customs officials, difficult policemen and bazooka-toting teenagers**

houses start pumping at ten in the morning. Young hoods roam the dusty border plaza in dark glasses and Nike trainers, trying to flog diamonds and ivory.

On the far side of the fence, in Namibia, traders armed with suitcases of hard currency are buying truckloads of groceries and beer for shipment to Luanda, which has become something of a boomtown lately.

Drillers have struck oil offshore – five new fields in the last 18 months or so, with reserves in the region of six billion barrels. Oil production is set to double. Diamonds are pouring out of the eastern highlands. Fabulous mineral deposits await exploitation in the hinterland. Angola is Africa's new El Dorado.

On the other hand, it's also the site of "the worst war on the planet," a ghastly conflict that seems to be hotting up again, if near-hysterical press reports are accurate. Angolans have been slaughtering each other since 1961, when locals took up arms against Portuguese colonists.

After 1974 came the Cold War phase, with South Africa and the CIA supporting the tribalistic rebels of UNITA while the Soviets backed the ruling MPLA, a movement led by assimilados and mestizos.

The foreigners pulled out in 1988, but the war continued like an old, bad habit, leaving

a once-thriving country devastated beyond comprehension. Now the latest truce between government and rebels is disintegrating, or so the newspapers say. There are reports of arms shipments, troops massing, attacks on outlying towns. Eric just shrugs. "Ag, ek worrie nie," he says. "Ek ry maar."

So he revs up the engine and the giant 26-wheelers lurch into motion, Mannetjie leading the way in his red International, his dad trailing bringing up the rear in an ancient Scania and the bakkie (pick-up) sandwiched between. We'll be in Angola for at least three weeks, so Eric's cab has all necessary comforts – orange fur on the dashboard, sakkie-sakkie tapes, bunk screened off by a Confederate flag in Yankee rebel trucker style.

The freezer's full of cold Cokes and braai meat, and there are several crates of cheap whiskey on the trailer, to be dispensed as bribes to customs officials, difficult policemen and bazooka-toting teenagers.

Beyond such inconveniences, there's malaria to contend with, and Angola's stomach bugs are dreaded, especially since a dash into the roadside bush can be very dangerous in a country littered with landmines. Still, says Eric, these things are as nothing. "In Angola, dis die paaie wat jou werklik laat kak."

Consider the one we're travelling on. Once tarred, its surface has been cut into knife-like



ridges by tank tracks and pitted with bomb craters. The verges are strewn with blitzed Russian troop carriers and tanks, relics of a great battle against the South Africans in the eighties. We're moving at walking pace, the truck creaking and groaning over savage potholes.

"This is nothing," says Eric. "There's places north of Lubango where the potholes are so deep the truck in front of you vanishes inside them. There's places where the mud's so deep in rainy season that you can't even open the door of your cab."

He starts telling hair-raising stories about breakdowns in a country where there are no phones, no spares, and no hope of rescue. "Who's gonna help you, my man? You just make a fuckin' plan."

Trip before last, he says, the trailer jackknifed and bent the differential. He and his son hauled the twisted metal into the shade of a tree, found some rocks and sand and ground it back into shape with their bare hands. "That's four months ago, and it's still working."

It seems foolhardy to be heading into a war in a truck with a dodgy differential and no weapons save a steel rod that Eric keeps handy in case someone soeks him at a truck stop. But where is the war? We can't seem to find it.

United Nations soldiers say that bandits are hitting at least one convoy daily on the road ahead, but truckers coming out of the badlands shrug as if to say, so what? There are always bandits on the road to Luanda.

At worst, the situation is "confusao." One driver – a mestizo in a pirate bandana – responds to our questions by brandishing his own AK47 and yelling, "No problemsh." He puts foot and vanishes in a cloud of dust. We pull into a town called Xangongo, where a nightmare of sorts awaits.

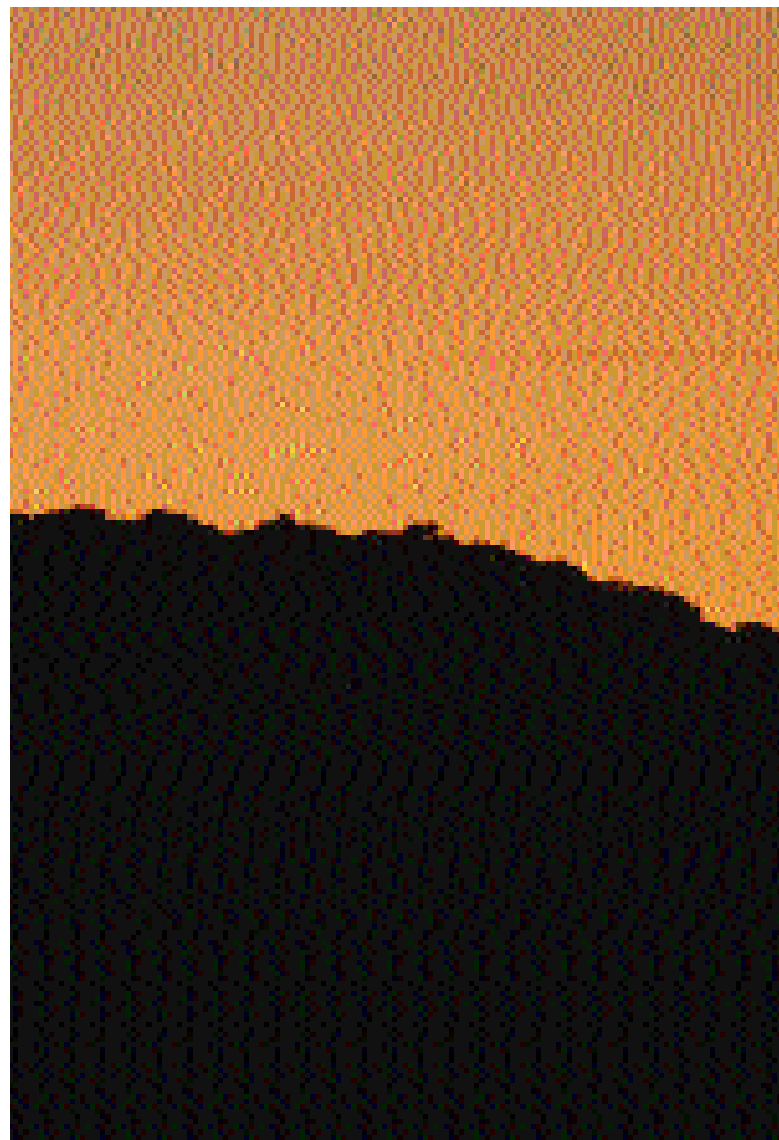
Xangongo (pronounced Shangongo) lies 200 km inside the border, but this is where customs are located, for reasons best known to the inscrutable Angolans.

Northbound trucks park in the ruins of an old prison and send emissaries to a Quonset hut on a bluff overlooking the crocodile-infested Kunene River. Exactly what goes on there is hard to say.

Some trucks go through almost immediately, trailing rumours of connections in high places. Others get stuck for a day or so while "informal taxes" are negotiated. We fall into a problematic third category: our consignment is owned by an upstanding company that has no intention of bribing anyone.

In fact, they've dispatched an executive from corporate headquarters to pay the necessary taxes. He comes out of the sky in a twin-engined Cessna and hobbles into town with 30,000 US dollars stuffed down the crotch of his trousers, only to be informed that there's a problem with the papers.

It takes all day to sort it out, and we sleep in the dust under the trucks. Next morning,



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the Angolans decide that our bill has to be settled in local currency. Ten years ago, one dollar was 29 kwanza. After a decade of hyper inflation, the exchange rate is now 67,000 and rising. Thirty thousand US is 20 billion kwanza, enough to fill a small bakkie. Where do you get a bakkieload of cash in a town with no banks, no credit system and no communications?

The executive leaps into the pickup and roars off to find out. We sit in the dust all day, sipping Eric's bribe supplies and speculating that this is all a plot on the part of the authorities to wear us down so that we slip them something under the table. The wind kicks up and blows trash around.

Eric regales us with a few battle epics, including a rather good one about the night he came off his bike at 270 kph and his leathers tinkled like a glockenspiel when the medics peeled them off him on account of all the smashed half-jacks in his pockets.

Bored out of his skull, Manneljie gets into an argument with a black man who threatens to stab him. They chase each other around a rusting bulldozer until that gets boring too. Come sunset, we're still sitting.

We buy a goat, slag it and braai it on a fire. Manneljie throws open the door of his cab and cranks up his beloved Leon Shuster. A stray Baster named Oupa Sakkie gets lekker

getrek on Eric's bribe supplies and dances the langarm all by himself under a full African moon.

Next day's a repeat of the two previous. All our papers are in order now save for a single stamp from the economic police, but their offices are deserted, today being Saturday, so it's 4 p.m. before we roll across the river and out onto the open plains.

The road runs straight as a die across golden savannah dotted about with baobab trees. Barebreasted women wander footpaths with water vessels on their heads. A goatherd has an AK 47 slung over his shoulder. Every hour or so, we pass a cluster of pastel colonial mansions crumbling gracefully to dust under the equatorial sun. The road is worse than ever.

Why don't they just send this stuff by sea, I ask, jerking a thumb at the eighty tons of construction material on our trailers. "Hey," says Eric. "You try it." As he tells it, Luanda's docks are a carnival of chaos and chicanery. Bureaucrats seize incoming consignments pending payment of extortionate bribes.

It takes weeks of haggling to secure their release, by which time your containers are likely to have been looted anyway. So it's simpler to send goods overland, and the truckers aren't complaining because they're making a fortune. You can double your money every two weeks running beer and Coca Cola to Luanda.

The margins in potatoes are even more intoxicating: a pocket of spuds costs about two quid at the border, and sells for five times that in the capital.

"It's mad," says Eric. "We haul food across some of the best farming country in Africa that's just lying fallow because of all the fighting and all the landmines in the soil. We haul salt past buggered salt mines, beer past buggered breweries. It's IFA, man - Independence Fucked Angola. Nothing works here any more." On that note we pull over in a hamlet called Uia and crawl back under the trucks for the night.

Eric's up at sunrise, checking his engine. He says something doesn't feel right, and sure enough, the gearbox is dangling at an awkward angle, four key bolts having been shaken loose by yesterday's vibrations. I want to turn back, discretion being the better part of valour, but the guys make a plan - throw a sling under the gearbox, truss it up and push on.

An hour later, there's an ominous knocking in the engine and the gears freeze. "Whoa, vok," says Eric. "Hier's groot kak." We open the engine again. There's oil everywhere. Eric figures the bearings are about to smash through the block. We can't go on, we can't go back, and we can't raise base on the radio. The only thing for it is to take the bakkie and hunt down a telephone.

Five hours later, we're in Lubango, a sizeable town loomed over by a mountain topped by a giant statue of Jesus, Rio de Janiero style. The power has failed, but there's a light on in the back of the central

post office. A clerk informs us that the phones have been down for the past nine days, but we're welcome to try again in a week or two.

We're driving around in the dark, trying to make a plan, when the lights suddenly come on again. The whole town whoops and pours out onto the streets. It's Saturday night, and Lubango is bent on partying.

We hit a restaurant, order chips and steak. We ask about the war. Angola's in a state of "meltdown," we explain, quoting the world's great newspapers. People look at us as though we're mad. Sure, the generals are maneuvering for control of the diamond fields near the Congo border, but otherwise, there's "no problemsh" aside from bandits, and they're no problem, either, provided you stay in convoy and don't travel at night.

Next morning, we cadge a call on the United Nations' satellite phone system and head back for the convoy, pausing only to have two tyres fixed. We figure this will take ten minutes, but in Angola, it takes all day, so it's sunset by the time we hit the road, whereupon both tyres blow in quick succes-

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sion, leaving us stranded in the middle of nowhere with no spare.

The guys stand around, scratching their heads. I watch the moon rise over the thorn trees and think about Ryszard Kapuscinski, the great Polish foreign correspondent who came to Angola in the seventies but could never quite find the frontline of the war he was supposed to be covering. "The front line is inside your head," he eventually concluded. "It travels with you wherever you go."

Right now, my head is saying that we are in serious danger – stuck in the dark in the bandit zone with few tools, no radio, and little hope of salvation. We're making an enormous racket, trying to lever the tyre off the wheel with sticks and screwdrivers so that we can replace the tube and get going again.

Every bandit for miles around is surely zeroing in on us. In the end, we get so desperate that we claw one side of the tyre off the rim with our fingernails, stuff the tube inside, pump it up and send it, as Eric says.

Back in Namibia, the bosses are rustling up a new "horse" to replace the crippled Scania. Our instructions are to meet them back

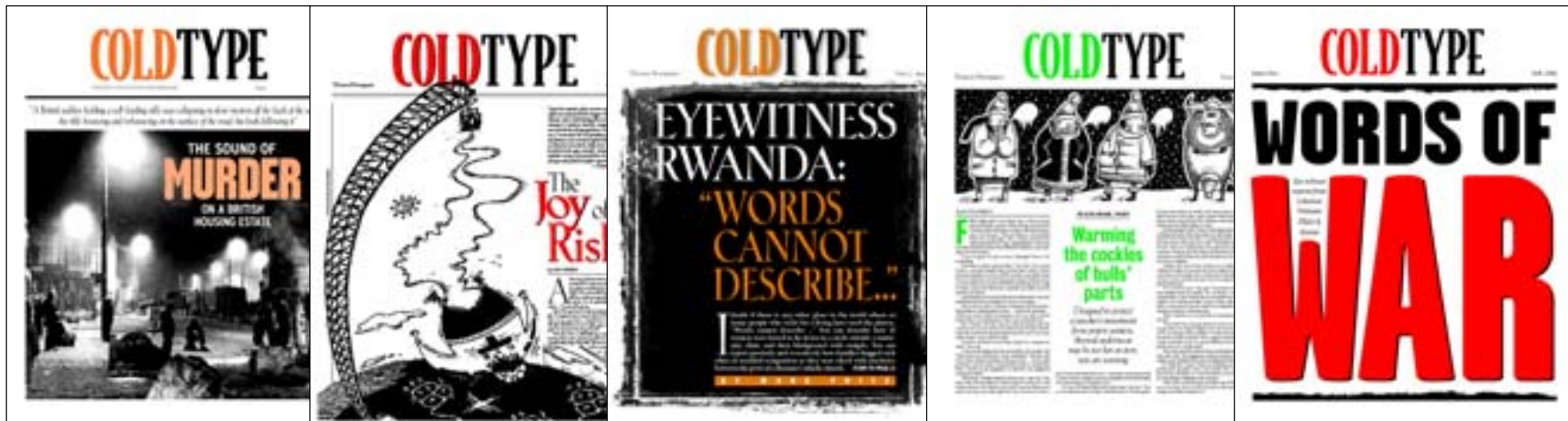
at the border, bringing the broken truck with us. One problem: no towbar. Eric makes a plan. He hacks a branch off an ironwood tree, mashes it into an angle iron under the wheels of his son's 40-tonner, and voila – an Angolan disselboom.

**W**e leave at dawn, heading back whence we came. Our hair is matted with twigs and dust, and the reek of our bodies is unbearable. We've been in Angola for a week, and covered fewer than 300 kilometres. At this rate, it will be a month before Eric sees a cold beer and a hot shower again.

The truck bucks through potholes at walking pace. Clouds of powdery dust billow through the open windows. The battler lowers his face into his hands and groans. ♦

*Rian Malan is the author of My Traitor's Heart, A South African Exile Returns To Face His Country, His Tribe, And His Conscience. His Rolling Stone article, In The Jungle, was runner up in the 2001 U.S. National Magazine awards.*

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