

## ‘WHAT HAPPENS TO A DREAM DEFERRED?’

### I

The idea of writing a biography of Thabo Mbeki took me by surprise, one night in 1998, while I was reading Hermione Lee’s exceptional life of Virginia Woolf. I had discovered Woolf as an impressionable undergraduate, and she had been to me what Marx, perhaps, had been to Mbeki: the spark that lit my intellectual life. Now, in the Lee biography, I re-encountered a typically Woolfian epigram I had once noted, but long forgotten: a good biography, she had written in 1917, ‘is the record of the things that change rather than of the things that happen.’<sup>1</sup>

Suddenly, the course that my writing life had taken made sense to me. I understood why, upon my return to the tumultuous South Africa of the 1990s, I had found a journalistic niche for myself as a profile-writer. Things were ‘happening’ all around me, but where – and what – was the ‘change’? How could I capture it, and distill it into print? What better way than by examining individual life stories as they negotiated and effected what we all called ‘the transition’? I saw my destiny. A 2 000-word newspaper profile was not going to satisfy my exacting muse. If I really wanted to understand the country of my birth and the process it was going through I needed to track the ‘changes’ as they had occurred over a century. And I needed to find the right protagonist to lead me along this path.

It was at the time that the Mandela presidency was winding down,

and anxiety was growing about the ‘aloof’, ‘obscure’, and even ‘paranoid’ man who was to replace him. This was a man who had returned to South Africa, eight years previously, the darling of the media and the West; a man whose abiding legacy was not only that he had managed to talk his comrades out of communist revolution, but that he had convinced the Western world that the ANC was a liberation movement rather than a terrorist organisation, and white South Africans that their destiny was safe in its hands. He had once been the ANC’s ‘Crown Prince Charming’, but he was now at worst ‘Machiavellian’ and at best ‘enigmatic’. Both these descriptions had become such media clichés that they had lost their meaning altogether: they were a lazy shorthand to describe a man no-one could get a handle on, and Mbeki seemed to encourage it. Even as he became the most powerful person in the country during his years as Mandela’s highly effective de facto ‘prime minister’, he shunned a public profile almost entirely, granting rare and controlled interviews.

I knew a little about Mbeki’s history: that he was Govan Mbeki’s son; that he came from the Eastern Cape elite and was educated at Sussex and in Moscow; that he had been Oliver Tambo’s protégé and the avatar of modernism and progress in the movement-in-exile; that he was a former communist now reviled by the left. If I could understand – and explain – all this history and how it had formed him, and then what had happened to him in the 1990s, perhaps I would be able to illuminate the dynamics of change in South Africa. Perhaps, too, I would be able to bring, into the daylight of democracy, the biography of a man in whose hands my country lay, but whose revolutionary ethos impelled him to sublimate his subjective experience to the imperatives of struggle. Unlike Mandela, who made a fetish of his biography for South Africans to identify with (‘I was in chains, you were in chains; as I was liberated, so were you; as I can forgive my oppressors, so too can you’), Mbeki denied any relationship between his life story and the work he did. ‘I am the struggle, and the struggle is me,’ he seemed to be saying. ‘There is nothing beyond or beneath that.’

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There are, certainly, colourless men and women in revolutionary movements who find affirmation in such ideology, but I was convinced that Mbeki was more interesting and complicated than that; the events and contentions of his presidency have proven me right. I sold the idea of a six-part biographical series to the *Sunday Times*, and then the nightmare

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began. For if I was going to do the job, then I would need to persuade my reticent subject to co-operate.

I worked like a demon. I interviewed most of his colleagues in cabinet, all of his family, and several old lovers and comrades. I went to his birth-place in a far-flung fold of the mountains of the Transkei, tracked down old college professors in obscure corners of the South Downs in England, found a treasure-trove of family photographs in an aunt's home in the hills above Durban, walked the corridors of the Lenin Institute with an old instructor of his in Moscow, found school reports at Lovedale in the Eastern Cape, even discovered the dusty red-leather-bound original of his master's thesis, stored at the bottom of a box of his personal effects left in a basement in Barnes. But Mbeki himself appeared impervious to my advances. I flattered his courtiers, I flirted with his advisors. I even began to talk like them: 'Chief!' I would ask, 'has the chief come back to say when I can see him?' 'No, chief, sorry chief,' they would reply, 'we've had no word from the big chief yet. Put it in writing again, will you?'

Finally, I found myself, in late 1998, at the launch of Mbeki's first anthology of speeches, *Africa: The Time has Come*. Brian Gilbertson, the industrialist who sponsored the book, introduced his new friend: 'The most frequent question I am asked is, "Who is this Thabo Mbeki?"'

Mbeki responded with an anecdote: when he was studying at Sussex University in the mid-1960s and trying to score with 'those lovely English female students', he said, they would rebuff him with the inevitable line, 'But Thabo, we don't *know* you!' – 'this even though I had been in the same class as them for the past two years! You see, Brian, this is a persisting problem!' On the surface, he was acknowledging that people have always found him enigmatic. But he was also identifying with those Sussex girls – telling his suitors that they might think they know him; that they might think, just because they have seen him on television every night or spent an evening drinking whisky with him or even fought alongside him in the struggle for a while – that they have some claim to intimacy with him. But knowing him means owning him, and he belongs to no-one. Through all his ideological permutations – from communist youth to allegedly 'Thatcherite' maturity – he has been guided to such an extent by the lodestar of self-determination that it has often seemed to leave him quite isolated, politically and even emotionally.

Many of Mbeki's confidants had told me about his warmth in private, and had suggested that his public reserve was the consequence of shyness rather than aloofness. Comfortable and relaxed at the book launch, addressing a hallfull of insiders whom he knew accepted his bona fides, he

was uncharacteristically expansive: he wished to dispel the notion forthwith, he said, that he did not tolerate dissent. He was an intellectual, a quester, and he urged all South Africans to follow suit, 'to ask and ask and ask'. If we did not get satisfactory answers from him, we were to 'ask and ask and ask' some more.

By this point, I was so desperate I almost joined the gang of sharp-elbowed toadies jostling with one another and dodging his security men to get their copies autographed and have a precious moment of false intimacy with him. Instead, I dashed home, went straight to my computer, and drafted a long personal letter to the man I intended to help vote into office a few months hence. I told him I was emboldened by his call to 'ask and ask and ask' and – inspired by Woolf on 'change' versus 'happening' – I offered him up a thesis, really, about biography as a tool for transformation. 'Biography,' I wrote, 'is the writing form most able to articulate, in a narrative manner, precisely the kind of transformative dynamics that you are leading our country through. Biography, like fiction, is powered by empathy and identification. It is focused on human protagonists; on people, their growth and transformation.'

Trying to finesse his own possible objection to the project, I continued that I did, however, understand the difference between biography and fiction, citing another guru in these troubled waters, the brilliant *New Yorker* essayist Janet Malcolm: 'The freedom to be cruel,' she had written in her monograph on Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, 'is one of journalism's uncontested privileges, and the rendering of subjects as if they were characters in bad novels is one of its widely accepted conventions ... The narratives of journalism (significantly called stories), like those of mythology and folklore, derive their power from their firm, undeviating sympathies and antipathies. Cinderella must remain good and the step-sisters bad. "Second stepsister not so bad after all" is not a good story.'<sup>2</sup>

Although heartfelt, this was by no means ingenuous. 'Mandela's successor not so bad after all' was not a good story, and even by this point in late 1998, even before he would become the president to question the link between HIV and AIDS and soft-pedal around Mugabe, Mbeki had built up a very adversarial relationship with the media. A vicious cycle had developed between him and his public image: the more bad press he received, the more convinced he became that there was a conspiracy against him – inside and outside the ANC – and the more he withdrew, thereby further fuelling the image of the invisible backroom operator, the silent and elegant assassin who left no traces as he bumped off his adversaries one by one. But as I delved into Thabo Mbeki's personali-

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ty and his past, I became convinced that if a certain persona had developed around him, he had had some hand in the making of it. He was a profound strategist and he knew that if he was going to carve a niche for himself beneath the overwhelming shadow of a universally beloved Nelson Mandela, he needed to affect the image of the vigilant back-roomer rather than the warrior at the front line. He knew that because people would never love him the way they did Madiba, they would need to respect him, even if it meant fearing him.

‘I respect,’ I concluded in my letter to Thabo Mbeki after the launch of his book, ‘that you do not take an “heroic” approach to leadership, one which is fed by a media either fawning or vituperative. I understand, too, that you govern through policy rather than through personality, and I expect that these (along with your punishing schedule!) are the reasons why I have been unable to profile you to date.’

## 2

My gambit worked. It was August 2000, just over a year after Thabo Mbeki became president, and I was sitting face to face with him in a downstairs reception room of Mahlamba Ndlopfu, his official residence in Pretoria. Mbeki had agreed to co-operate with my project. He had seen me twice already, during the run-up to the 1999 elections; I had published my series in the *Sunday Times*;<sup>3</sup> now I had the commission to write this book.

It was a Saturday and the president was dressed casually – comfy house shoes beneath slacks, a weekend cardigan buttoned over a polo shirt, a well-gnawed house pipe in his mouth. But bloodshot, puffy eyes betrayed his exhaustion. He had managed to burst out of Mandela’s shadow and into international recognition, not only as the liberating philosopher-king who was beginning to make post-apartheid South Africa work and as the first African leader since the *uhuru* generation to have a visionary plan for African development, but also as the putative defender of a loathsome tyrant to the north and as an ‘AIDS-denialist’ crank.

Over the past year I had watched the South African presidency become more logical, more substantive and more hands-on than it had been during the rousing but scattershot Mandela era. But I had also watched it contract to a point where it had become nitpicky rather than all-embracing, introverted rather than communicative, too often mistrusting and not often enough inspiring. I had watched Mbeki withdraw

from the unexpected but highly effective expansiveness of his election campaign – when he actually seemed to be taking pleasure in engaging with his people – into an increasingly sullen and irascible isolation.

And, most difficult indeed for a biographer, I had felt that I too had lost sight of my subject. His office had cancelled meetings repeatedly in the 16 months since our last encounter. I knew that the bad press had made him more ambivalent than ever about letting an outsider in, and this sense of embattlement had radiated, like an electric shield, around him: when I touched base with his friends and colleagues, I found that even the most considered and independent ones had either retreated into prickly caution or soared into manic praise-song.

Meanwhile, I was perpetually called upon to pronounce on him, in the media and at dinner tables, and my friends knew that the surest way to plunge me into a sullen irascibility of my own was to ask me to explain him. It was something I found increasingly difficult to do: in my attempt to understand his position on AIDS, I even lost friends – who saw, in any attempt at empathy, a collusion in genocide. I was convinced that, no matter what my personal feelings, I had to maintain such empathy: the biographer's job, I told my friends and critics somewhat self-righteously, was to sit on his subject's shoulder and see the world the way he did. But to do this job, I needed a shoulder to sit on in the first place, and there was none offered.



The expectations were high, then, as I sat opposite Thabo Mbeki now, and watched him carve a space for us, with his pipe-smoking paraphernalia, out of the official residence nowhereland that would be his home for the next decade. The perpetual scraping and tapping kept his restless hands permanently occupied, freeing his mind to work, as he conjured with pipe smoke the illusion of home, an intimate study in which we might comfortably sit. We talked about the 'disconnection' – his word – of his childhood, and about the way his African Renaissance ideology was powered, at least in part, by his need to reconnect with his roots. We talked about race and transformation, about the difficulties of governance, about his history in exile. And we talked, for over two hours, about AIDS. I was impressed at his grasp of detail: his recall of information is almost as astonishing as his stamina. Mbeki's seductive capacity in one-on-one meetings is legendary, but I felt neither seduced nor charmed by him – and had no sense that he had set out to do either. This was a job, and he worked.

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His discourse was as ruminative as ever, and he proved himself far more partial to the intellectual's tendency to complicate things than to the politician's one of simplifying them. But he answered my questions with frankness and consideration, even if he refused to do so in sound bites. Although he was diligent and thorough, he volunteered no more than was requested and initiated no conversation himself, making no attempt at establishing a connection with small talk, or even with more eye contact than was absolutely necessary. The pipe thing, I came to see, was more than just a way of focusing the mind: it created a scrim between him and his interlocutor, allowing him to work with ideas, unhindered by the mess of human interaction.

His tone remained, throughout, that of a schoolmaster whose patience and reasonableness were bordered with slightly exasperated incredulity. 'Now look, it's really very simple'; 'But don't you see ....?'; 'Well, I've tried to explain': these were some of the ways Mbeki framed his thoughts as the highveld winter night fell sharply, and we sat in darkness until someone remembered us and came in to turn the lights on. I watched, out of the corner of my eye, as staff scuttled off to their cosy well-lit homes, their families, their lives.

At some point, Mbeki's wife Zanele – an elegant, independent and highly intelligent woman – rode into the room on the warm breath of a day's outing: she was lively and effervescent, engaging and solicitous, excited by the prospect of joining us. I willed her silently to stay, but he willed her, with the greater force, to leave, and so she disappeared into the gloom, reappearing a couple of hours later in a dressing gown – 'Oh, are you two still at it? Thabo will keep you all night!' – to offer some refreshment.

A waiter subsequently emerged from the bowels of the darkened house, bearing a tray of those cold, fried hors d'oeuvres at which official residences seem to excel. Mbeki waved him impatiently away, and the tray was put just beyond our reach. Finally, at close to midnight, I was running out of tape. I was exhausted and hungry, dying for a toilet but terrified to go in case, in my temporary absence, he realised he had a country to run. If this was an endurance test, he won. I found myself thanking him for his time, and terminated the interview.

He saw me out personally, and my last image was, finally, that of a host; of a solitary man snug in his woollen cardy standing at the hardwood door of the grand gabled Cape Dutch-styled residence, offering what seemed to me to be a somewhat regretful half-wave goodbye. I imagined him wandering aimlessly about the huge old pile of Mahlamba

Ndlopfu – originally called ‘Libertas’ and built in 1940 for Jan Smuts – before finding himself upstairs in the comfort of his study, lost in his books and on the Internet, bathed until dawn in the flickering blue light of his computer screen, a bottle of Scotch and his rack of briars his only company.

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As I drove home to Johannesburg, I tried to understand the emptiness I was feeling. This was the president of my country; enormously busy. He spoke to almost no journalists, and yet he had given me over six hours of his time. Why, then, was I bothered that he did not ask me a single question, did not wish to break bread with me, did not respond to any of my gambits for small talk? Any portraitist will tell you that while a subject must be posed when being painted, you need to see him move, spontaneously, in those breaks when he stretches his legs or drinks a cup of tea, to gather in the emotion with which you will then animate the image. Otherwise, it is an entirely formal exercise: you might as well practise your brush strokes on a bowl of fruit.

Perhaps I was disappointed, too, because I had in mind the war stories of older journalists who documented the collapse of apartheid, and who still tell tales of their safaris to Lusaka in the 1980s, where they would hunker down until dawn in their hotel rooms with Mbeki, and sort South Africa’s problems out as they killed a bottle or three together. They came back thinking, like so many others, that they knew him, charmed and bedazzled by this brilliant, thoughtful, lucid man. He not only answered all their questions, but asked them many too, treating them as valuable sources for what was happening back home.

Was that my fantasy? That Thabo Mbeki and I would recreate the Pamodzi Hotel, circa 1988, in a drafty downstairs reception room of the South African president’s official residence in Pretoria 12 years later? That we would sort out his AIDS mess together while working our way through his finest single malt? We live in different times, and, ironically, the openness that characterised Thabo Mbeki’s personality in a time of war and struggle was no longer possible now that he led the democracy for which he had fought, so eloquently, in the 1980s. But it dawned upon me, as I drove the 60 kilometres back to Johannesburg, that the sense of emptiness I felt was not so much because of thwarted expectations but because, paradoxically, I had indeed re-established empathy with my subject – despite or even because of all his stratagems to keep me at bay.

It was Mbeki himself who gave me the word ‘disconnect’ to describe

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his (to all intents and purposes) parentless childhood, and then his itinerant adult life. Now I wondered, after our time together, whether it was not a condition still very much alive in him. For any returning freedom fighter, coming home must mean the expectation of reconnection and reintegration, of release from the vagabondage of exile, of deliverance from the oppression which sent one off in the first place – and for many, the homecoming is profoundly traumatic, for it can never match up to such fantasies for redemption. How much more acute that expectation must be – and how much more difficult its lack of fulfilment – for one who felt, as Mbeki did, ‘disconnected’ to begin with.

From a very young age, his response to this condition of disconnection had been to sublimate all emotions, all relationships, all desires, into the struggle for liberation. He had long made a political career – unusual indeed for a freedom fighter – around pragmatism, but at his core he was a revolutionary idealist. He had given himself entirely – as his father did before him – to the ANC, to redeem the hardship of his life, his parents’ life, the life of his people, by prosecuting a struggle for the utopian vision his father sold to him as they sat together in the hut that served as Govan Mbeki’s study, before he could even read. So much had been sacrificed – father, son, childhood, family, innocence – to the cause of the liberation of his people, a task he has been predestined to fulfil since his youth, and here he was, home at last, free at last, in power, trying to make the grand project of post-apartheid South Africa work, against impossible odds and crushing expectations.

In a previous conversation Mbeki had told me that living in Britain – where he was a student through the 1960s – was ‘very easy, there was no sense of alienation, I’ve never quite felt a stranger there, but it couldn’t quite be home’; living in other parts of Africa was ‘not dislocation, but not quite home’ either. He had spent most of his adult life on aeroplanes, in hotel rooms, in hotel lobbies, in the drafty reception rooms of official residences, and the overwhelming feeling I had, now, after the hours I spent with him a year into his presidency, was that he was still in transit; ‘not quite home’ yet. He did not, yet, seem to be able to bridge the distance that existed between his fantasy of leading South Africa to freedom – the expectations heaped upon him as Govan Mbeki’s son and Oliver Tambo’s protégé and Nelson Mandela’s successor – and the reality of actually being there, at Mahlabisa Ndlopfu, in the president’s chair, at the end point of everything he has ever planned for, full of patterns for redemption but without the necessary power, really, to implement them.

I began to think about the great African leaders who had fallen off the

perch of their ideals, trying to defend their revolutions: Kwame Nkrumah, Kenneth Kaunda, Jomo Kenyatta, Samora Machel, Eduardo dos Santos, and – of course – Robert Mugabe. Could there be a madness visited upon this continent's leaders, not because of any pathological defects that make it difficult for democracy and equality to take root in Africa, but owing to the gap that exists between the Utopian expectations of revolution and the dystopic reality they have to deal with once they find themselves, at last, in State House? The best leaders of developed countries are, of course, visionaries too – but their vision is tempered by the certainty that their subjects survived before they came along and will get along just fine after they leave. How different it is for an African revolutionary who finally wins his opportunity to govern. The mandate with which Thabo Mbeki came to power was not simply to raise taxes or lower them; to improve the National Health Service or balance the budget: his mandate was nothing less than the salvation of his people.

Liberation movements are driven by dreams, and the ANC has been no exception. But its history in government has been a perpetual scaling back of these dreams. The Reconstruction and Development Programme, the New Labour Dispensation, Houses For All, Water For All, A Better Life For All, Universal Primary Healthcare, Curriculum 2005: policies of redemption all, one by one they have had to be revised and downscaled, with their champions and drivers claiming not grand victories but small advances, pleading with the people for patience. In this environment is it any wonder that many of those in power in South Africa found themselves – even if they refused to admit it – feeling disempowered and impotent, and that they responded so defensively to criticism? Like an increasing number of South Africans, I have wearied over time of the government's tendency to blame all problems on the legacy of apartheid (or the 'counter-revolutionary' agendas of the media), but I began to realise now, for the first time, how profoundly disempowering it must be if you – the moral victor of the struggle against apartheid – have to blame your shortcomings perpetually on the illicit regime you thought you had conquered.

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What happens to a dream deferred?

Driving back to Johannesburg from Mahlamba Ndlopfu, I found myself reciting this line from Langston Hughes's great cycle of poems. It is a line

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that Thabo Mbeki himself often used to make the point – as he put it in 1998 – that ‘we are faced with the danger of a mounting rage to which we must respond seriously.’<sup>4</sup> Mbeki had said repeatedly, in one way or another, that he was haunted by the nightmare of a seething majority that would boil over into rebellion because its dream of liberation had been deferred rather than redeemed. But it came to me, as I thought about our six hours together, that his own dreams of redemption, of connection, of homecoming – of possessing the potency to free a people – might also have been deferred, and that his anxiety about the potentially violent possibilities of the nation’s ‘dream deferred’ might have had a more private and internal application too.

‘What happens to a dream deferred?’ Mbeki had asked this question in parliament, paraphrasing Langston Hughes to introduce a debate on reconciliation and nation-building in 1998: ‘It explodes.’<sup>5</sup> As soon as I got home after my meeting with Mbeki in August 2000, I looked up the poem and saw that Mbeki had turned a question into a prophecy. Hughes eschewed any such certainty:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore –  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over –  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?<sup>6</sup>

Hughes’s concern, when he wrote the poem, was the plight of fellow black Americans whose dreams of emancipation had sagged, rotted and festered into inner-city ghettos like Harlem. Thabo Mbeki’s concern, when he paraphrased Hughes, was the crisis of expectation of black South Africans awaiting liberation and who now found themselves often with less even than they had before, and thus on the brink of dangerous explosion.

Mbeki might have deliberately misquoted Hughes, turning a question into a prophecy so as to shock his complacent listeners into action: it was, after all, in his polemical interests to predict an explosion rather than a festering sore or a sagging load. But if we believe that slips and mistakes can be pathways into their speaker's unconscious, then we need to consider another possibility too: that Mbeki's certainty about explosion – his uncharacteristic lack of ambiguity – came from something else as well. He remembered the poem in a certain way, perhaps even without going back to recheck it, because it reflected his own experience. Perhaps he too was living the dream deferred; perhaps he too feared an explosion.

This book demonstrates that if Mbeki has been driven by one overarching dream, it is that of self-determination – personal, political and psychological. Indeed, his second volume of speeches, published in 2002, is entitled *Africa, Define Yourself*; page through it, and you will be struck by the way he sears his public utterances about Africa with images of dissolution and redemption, of death and rebirth. It is hard to engage with this discourse – in the book, or collected on 'The Mbeki Page' at the ANC website – without coming to the conclusion that its writer's dream of self-determination remained somewhat deferred, even as he sat in the presidency.

A few months after being inaugurated, in October 1999, Mbeki gave an uncharacteristically emotional address at a memorial service for Julius Nyerere: 'We were mere schoolboys when we saw the black star rise on our firmament,' he said, 'as the colonial Gold Coast crowned itself with the ancient African name of Ghana. We knew then that the promise we had inherited would be honoured. The African giant was awakening!' But then, he continued, 'it came to pass that the march of African time snatched away that promise. Very little seemed to remain along its path except the footprints of despair.' And he went on to enumerate these footprints: poverty, hunger, disease, war, oppression, corruption, from Algeria to Angola, Sudan to South Africa.

The dirge turned into a resurrection chant, however, and he concluded by speaking, as he often does, of how democracy was now rooting itself in the African soil, with the teeming African millions now walking 'tall, with straight backs', 'assuming their rightful place as their own liberators from tyranny, from fear, from poverty and from dehumanisation.'<sup>7</sup> But still, in his voice and in his language I could hear something close to desperation as he conjured up Nyerere's legacy, as if he was attempting to banish those footprints of despair; that ineluctable march of African time.

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Now, four decades later, it had fallen on Thabo Mbeki's shoulders, finally, to honour the promise he had inherited from Nkrumah, from Nyerere, from Mandela, from his own father lost to the struggle. And so he had made the African Renaissance his mantra, staking his political future on the promise of the 'rebirth and renewal' of the continent, and becoming Africa's most important statesman as he travelled the world, selling this vision. If the African Renaissance was, as I shall argue in this book, the consequence of a personal attempt to reconnect with his roots, then it was also a defence – admirably creative – against the anxieties of the dream deferred; the willing of a self-determination that was not always possible in the real world he had come to govern.

### 3

In the years following my Saturday night encounter with Thabo Mbeki in August 2000, I had three more interviews with him. None of these was as intense; neither, too, did I ever find a bottle of Scotch next to the recorder between us. He remained as coolly professional as ever, although growing familiarity (and perhaps trust) – coupled with my deeper probing of more specific themes – seemed to shift our discourse sideways a little, away from the biographical and the political, and more towards the analytical and even the affective.

In July 2004, shortly after he led the ANC to a triumphant re-election and was settling in to a second term, I met him in the same downstairs drawing room as before, on a Sunday afternoon. I had been squeezed in between a visiting Chinese delegation that had run way over time with its innumerable protocols, and an urgent delegation of cabinet ministers who were, I could see, wearing the carpet thin with their impatience in the next room. But in that way of his, Mbeki waved such distractions off, as if to say to me, 'Oh, the business of government! Who wants all that fuss and bother? Come. Let's leave it outside for a while, and talk about things that matter. About ideas!'

I had been struck by his exuberance on the campaign trail, and I asked him whether he was still haunted by the apocalyptic nightmare of 'the dream deferred'. He waved the question aside as the preoccupation of another era, and verified my sense that such anxieties had been closely linked to the profound 'disempowerment' – I suggested the word, and he agreed to it, wholeheartedly – that he and his comrades had felt upon going into government in 1994. To illustrate the point, Mbeki used

the way he and his government had been forced to acquiesce to the Washington Consensus on macro-economic policy, when they implemented their controversial GEAR programme in 1996. But now, he assured me, he had a lot more confidence after a decade in power, and was far more firmly in control of the levers of power.

He also told me that his experiences on the campaign trail had proven to him that there was no longer any possibility of 'some big eruption' on the streets of South Africa. People complained, certainly, but in good cheer rather than with flammable grievance, and he had encountered something entirely new on the hustings: 'a much greater sense of joy in South African society today', 'a much greater sense of celebration', which he attributed to 'a much greater sense of reassurance amongst everybody'.

I had spent a little time trailing Mbeki, on both the 1999 and 2004 campaigns, and it did not seem to me that South Africans were any more (or less) 'joyful' now than they had been five years previously. Rather, I surmised, Mbeki had simply been confident enough and thus open enough to receive this 'joy' – a natural exuberance that is part of the South African character – for the first time, and to allow it to affirm him. As I probed deeper, it seemed I might be right: Mbeki told me that one of the main indicators of this new mood on the streets was the extremely positive response he got from ordinary white South Africans – particularly working-class Afrikaners – while on the stump. They accepted him as their president even if they were not going to vote for him, and this led him to believe that there was no longer any significant 'sense of distance' between whites and blacks.

As he spoke, something occurred to me: was it possible that, just as his earlier anxieties about explosion were linked to his own experience of the dream deferred and his worries about self-determination, his perception of a new sense of 'joy' abroad in South Africa was a reflection of his own new-found sense of wellbeing and confidence? His international reputation had never been higher; the AIDS wars seemed to have abated; his economic policies were working and the country was booming even if growth was still jobless; his hold over the ANC also seemed to be stronger, even, than Mandela's had been at his heyday. Most importantly, he had just won an election, gaining for the ANC an unprecedented margin on the strength of his own incumbency rather than on the legacy of his predecessor.

Once more, Mbeki saw me out himself, and waved me off from the grand portal that had previously framed Smuts and Verwoerd, De Klerk and Mandela. But this time, as I drove back to Johannesburg, I reflected

on a story Mbeki had just told me, about a trip to the Karoo – recounted at the end of this book – which suggested that he had found some form of inner peace. I convinced myself that my subject *was* finally ‘home’. And I heaved a sigh of relief.

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Was I wrong?

Although the ANC had rallied behind Mbeki with formidable collective purpose to win the 2004 elections, it was, in fact, riven by discord. Since the 1990s there had been major contention about economic policy, and deep dissatisfaction – particularly among those on the left – with Mbeki’s governing style: his alleged desire for central control and intolerance of dissent, and his rather blunt way of labeling critics as enemies of progress. Then, in late 2002, it was revealed that Mbeki’s deputy, Jacob Zuma, was being investigated in connection with corruption charges relating to his financial advisor, Schabir Shaik: it was alleged that Shaik had solicited a bribe worth R 500 000 a year from a French arms company, on Zuma’s behalf.<sup>8</sup> Zuma believed he was being victimised by the national director of public prosecutions, Bulelani Ngcuka, as part of a conspiracy to dispose of him. He and his supporters counter-charged that Ngcuka had once been investigated as an apartheid spy, and was exacting revenge for this; Mbeki appointed a judicial commission of inquiry which ultimately cleared Ngcuka, who nonetheless resigned, as did his principal, the justice minister, Penuell Maduna.

Post-apartheid politics had never been rougher, and Mbeki was deeply involved. He had been briefed about the allegations against Zuma since at least 2001; in November 2002, he had declined to accept Zuma’s offer of resignation.<sup>9</sup> Then, in August 2003 – after consulting with Mbeki – Ngcuka had issued a statement that although there was a ‘prima facie’ case against Zuma, he would not be charged.<sup>10</sup> Zuma and his supporters saw this as a deliberate ploy to damn him even though there was not enough evidence to get him into court.

Just before Ngcuka made his statement, Mbeki had, in fact, asked Zuma to resign. But by this point Zuma’s attitude had hardened, and he dared his boss to fire him. Mbeki blinked, and instead authorised a statement to be released from the Presidency declaring that no action would be taken against his deputy. This was not only because of the presumption of innocence, but because of ‘trust ... based on confidence that was so central to survival and success in the conduct of struggle.’<sup>11</sup>

The day after this statement was issued, I happened to have an interview with a senior ANC leader intimate with all the above players. 'This is the worst time for us to talk about the ANC,' the comrade said to me. 'We have never been more depressed.'

This was a person who had suffered more than most during the years of struggle. 'Surely not,' I countered. 'You've been arrested, detained, tortured; you've had your family shattered by exile and imprisonment. You've lived without even the least flicker of possibility of return home in your lifetime. How can you even compare this to that?'

My interlocutor's response was resolute, and signalled the depth of the crisis: 'No, this is worse. It's tearing us apart.' Somewhat atavistically, the ANC still understands itself as a family rather than as a modern political party; hence the Presidency's statement that action would not be taken against Zuma on the basis of 'trust'. In such an environment, a war between leaders is a blood feud rather than a power play or an ideological battle; Cain versus Abel rather than Saul versus David. Nothing could be worse.

The fact that Mbeki and Zuma had been perceived to be so close – brothers in struggle – only exacerbated the distress. The two men, exact contemporaries, had met in the field in Swaziland in 1975, had advanced through the exile hierarchy on parallel tracks, and had been a close political duo since the late 1980s, when they had worked together covertly to set up contact with the South African authorities, and then run negotiations together until sidelined by Cyril Ramaphosa and his supporters in 1991. Even after that, they had been a formidable combination, working together to bring recalcitrant Afrikaner secessionists and Zulu nationalists into the 1994 elections. In 1997, the ANC selected them as president and deputy president of the party respectively: no-one doubted that they would rule the post-Mandela era side by side.

As political partners, they manifested, as someone close to both of them put it to me, an 'uncanny co-ordination'. If Mbeki was the head of the movement, then Zuma was its heart: the latter's easy affability and empathetic demeanour meant that he held the party and the ruling tripartite alliance together. Zuma took on the role of smoothing the feathers that Mbeki seemed unconcerned about ruffling: with the AIDS community; with slighted alliance partners; with prickly egos in the provinces. If you felt unaffirmed by the 'chief', you knew you could find a sympathetic ear with his deputy, and both men seemed to understand, even if tacitly, this division of labour.<sup>12</sup>

But beneath the public impression of a watertight political duo, the relationship had become fraught. Mbeki, and those around him, began

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to worry that Zuma possessed a dangerous combination of unhealthy ambition and poor judgement, and Zuma began to feel that the loyalty he had long shown to Mbeki was not being reciprocated (Zuma had been instrumental in advising Mandela to appoint Mbeki rather than Ramaphosa as deputy president in 1994). In fact, Mbeki had come to believe that Zuma did not have what it took for high office; he nonetheless supported Zuma to be the ANC deputy president in 1997 because he believed his old comrade was the only candidate strong enough to keep Winnie Mandela out.

Then, in 1999, Mbeki attempted to bypass Zuma by offering the deputy presidency of the country to the IFP's Chief Buthelezi. But the ANC leadership in KwaZulu-Natal scuppered the plan, something for which many in Mbeki's inner circle blame Zuma. The net effect was that Buthelezi declined the post, thereby clearing the way for Zuma himself to take it, and thus remain in the line of succession.

The working relationship between the two men thereafter was not good: the impression gained by Zuma and his staff is that they were iced out of any significant decision-making, while the technocrats around Mbeki saw Zuma as an incompetent drain on the presidency's can-do image. Mbeki also seemed to have taken sides in the endemic factionalism of KwaZulu-Natal ANC politics, and had gained the ear, in the province, of Zuma's rivals. The relationship reached a nadir in 2001, when Mbeki became convinced that there was a coup plot against him, led by three former rivals-turned-businessmen, Tokyo Sexwale, Cyril Ramaphosa and Mathews Phosa. He believed that Zuma had been supplying them with information, and confronted his deputy; this led to Zuma's extraordinary and seemingly unprovoked press statement that he had no aspirations to become president.<sup>13</sup> According to comrades close to both of them, it was at this point that trust was broken, irrevocably – no matter what the 2003 statement later said.

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Perhaps it was a measure of Mbeki's newfound confidence – that sense of being 'home' that I discerned when I met him in July 2004 – that enabled him to fire Zuma with such alacrity in June 2005, once a court found Schabir Shaik guilty of brokering a bribe on Zuma's behalf, with Zuma's consent, from the French arms company Thomson-CSF.<sup>14</sup>

I wondered at the time, as did many, why Mbeki had waited so long. He had, after all, been briefed about the state's investigations into his

deputy since at least 2001. Zuma has suggested that it was all part of an elaborate plot to use the organs of state to get rid of him<sup>15</sup> – perhaps because Mbeki was too weak to exercise his power to act against him politically. While it is difficult to accept the first part of this equation (the evidence is that Mbeki did, indeed, go out of his way to protect Zuma), the second part rings true: because Zuma had been Mbeki's 'heart' for so long, and because of Zuma's popularity within the ANC leadership, Mbeki did not seem to trust that he would maintain the confidence of the movement if he fired his deputy. It was only once there was evidence against Zuma accepted by a court of law, in the Shaik trial, that Mbeki felt confident – or desperate – enough to act.

But two weeks later, at the ANC's National General Council meeting, Mbeki's apparent hold over the party suddenly shattered, as the president's many detractors coalesced in support of the dismissed deputy president as a way of voicing their dissatisfaction with him: even though Zuma had been persuaded to step down from his party responsibilities, the meeting aggressively demanded he resume them. This, in effect, was the moment that the Zuma presidential campaign began: he was packaged as something of an 'anti-Mbeki' – effusive, empathetic, a South African everyman who symbolised the alienation of the ordinary person from the machinations of the new black business class and technocratic elite. Polls showed that – apart from his ethnic base in KwaZulu-Natal – Zuma drew his support from marginalised sectors of the population: young people, rural folk, and the unemployed.<sup>16</sup>

Mbeki might have maintained the loyalty of a majority of the ANC leadership – and, if polls were to be believed, of most South Africans – but in the months and years to come it was open season on his reputation: from the songs sung at COSATU conferences deriding him as a 'big ugly dog', to the burning of tee shirts and posters bearing his likeness, to the haemorrhaging of key loyalists away from his inner circle, to the determination by Zuma and his supporters to prevent Mbeki from remaining ANC president after 2007, to the way that Zuma supporters jeered at him and walked out on him at events in KwaZulu-Natal.

It went beyond Zuma partisanship and ANC factionalism: the crisis prised open a space, in broader society, for unprecedentedly robust criticism of the leadership of the liberation movement that had brought freedom just over a decade previously. This was healthy, and many of the criticisms were legitimate – such as the dissonance Mbeki had created around AIDS, or the gap between his pronouncements on cronyism and corruption and his seeming inability to act against compromised or inef-

fective members of his own government, such as the police chief Jackie Selebi or the health minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang. But even so, the pitch of the discourse often seemed fuelled by a sense of anger and betrayal levelled at someone who had been vested with a responsibility far greater than mere executive office. It was as if, by voting Mbeki into office, we had charged him with nothing less than the custody of our dreams – and with every violent crime, with every unemployed high school graduate, with every AIDS death, he stood accused of shattering them.

Suddenly, in the months following Mbeki's dismissal of Zuma, comrades who had been tight-lipped about him for years were approaching *me*, unsolicited: even his closest allies had something to say about how he had been, at least in part, the architect of his own downfall. Was this the beginning of the fifth act of a modern-day Shakespearean tragedy? Would Mbeki be remembered, by future generations, as yet another great man brought down by his own fatal flaws?

When he was a young man studying at the Lenin Institute in Moscow in 1969, Mbeki's favourite play had been *Coriolanus*. He understood the tragedy's eponymous hero – conventionally seen as a vainglorious proto-fascist – to be the very model for a 20th-century revolutionary, not unlike Che Guevara, full of 'truthfulness, courage, self-sacrifice, absence of self-seeking, brotherliness, heroism, optimism', as he wrote to his Sussex friends, Mel and Rhiannon Gooding.<sup>17</sup>

The Goodings, like most conventional readers of *Coriolanus*, protested vigorously. No! Coriolanus was a tyrant driven by hubris! But as a fired-up young communist, Thabo Mbeki saw him as a revolutionary role model precisely because he was prepared to go to war against his own people, who had become a 'rabble', an 'unthinking mob, with its cowardice, its lying, its ordinary people-ness'.<sup>18</sup> Rome had to be purged of its rot, and Coriolanus would kill his own mother in the process if he had to. The reason for the Roman general's exile in the first place had been that, upon returning to the city after a victorious battle, he had refused to boast about his war wounds; he would not swagger or take part in the 'heroic' performance of the returning conqueror. He would not dissemble: 'I play the man I am.'<sup>19</sup>

This assertion of self-determination has been Mbeki's mantra: from his refusal to 'spin' the media, to his refusal to compromise on positions that he believed were principled, such as the toxicity of ARVs, or the right of Zimbabwe to remain in the Commonwealth. But Mbeki is a careful and subtle reader: why, then, did he not understand that Coriolanus's tragic

flaw was precisely his inability to find a way of casting the image of himself that the people wanted, that was expected of him, while remaining true to his principles?

When, at our very first meeting in early 1999, I asked him how to escape the fate of Coriolanus, his answer was fascinating, and not a little chilling: change society, not yourself. While studying at the Lenin Institute, he told me, he had become enamoured of a Soviet critic who argued that the reason why Shakespeare's heroes always die is not because of their tragic flaws, but rather because this is the way the playwright illuminated society's imperfection: 'The person who does good, and does it honestly, must expect to be overpowered by forces of evil,' Mbeki said to me. 'But it would be incorrect not to do good just because you know death is coming.'

So struck was I by this statement that I wrote it out and pinned it to my notice board after our interview, next to a photograph of Thabo Mbeki in his increasingly characteristic pose of scepticism, the mouth scowling slightly, the eyebrows and nose raised, as if to say, 'I'm waiting. Prove me wrong.' It remained there, half-forgotten, for six years – until one day in the heat of the Zuma crisis in mid-2005 I noticed it again: *The person who does good, and does it honestly, must expect to be overpowered by forces of evil.* It seemed to be the key to the way Mbeki was dealing with the Zuma crisis, this potentially tragic fifth act of his political career: whatever anyone else thought of him, he remained, in his own mind, a person doing good and doing it honestly.

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I do not doubt my intuition that Mbeki came 'home', finally, some time around 2004. But the Zuma crisis demonstrates the reality that homecoming does not necessarily mean the realisation of one's dreams – which must of necessity remain deferred, by their very definition. As I have tracked Mbeki over the years of the Zuma crisis, those shadows of disconnection I discerned, in my meeting with him that long winter's night in 2000, have only seemed to grow. His praise-singers have become more manic, his detractors more embittered and betrayed, the man himself more isolated and inscrutable.

According to the South African constitution, South African presidents are limited to only two terms. Mbeki's second term expires in 2009, and he has made it clear that he has no intention of attempting to amend the law so that he can remain in office. But there are no such proscriptions

on the ANC presidency, and as it became clearer that this position – the gateway to the succession – was Zuma’s to lose, Mbeki let it be known that he would be available for re-election, at the party’s December 2007 conference, as the head of the party.

While the succession debate was raging, I was completing my final edit of this book. During the course of 2007, several scheduled meetings with Mbeki were cancelled. We communicated, instead, in a novel way. I would e-mail questions for him to his wife, and he would respond to them by talking into a dictaphone. A minidisk would then be delivered to me – sometimes very late at night. In these questions, I asked him to reflect on the succession, but his answers were anodyne; milder versions of his frequent public statements denying any crisis in the ANC and accusing the media of counter-revolutionary agendas for suggesting anything of the sort.

But I knew, from his confidants, that he was deeply distressed by the possibility of being succeeded by Zuma, and that he believed his deputy’s play for the presidency to be part of a strategy to avoid prosecution (Zuma had been charged in 2005, but the case had been thrown out of court for technical reasons, and the National Prosecuting Authority was considering charging him again). More than that: Mbeki allegedly worried that Zuma and his backers had no respect for the rule of law, and would be unaccountable to the constitutional dispensation the ANC had put into place if they came to power. There was also the worry of a resurgence of ethnic politics, and – given his support from the left – that Zuma’s leftist advisors would undo all the meticulous stitching of South Africa into the global economy that Mbeki and his economic managers had undertaken over 15 years.

So compromised was Mbeki by the battle with Zuma that not even his strongest supporters believed that his continued presidency of the ANC was ideal. But many concurred that he was, perhaps, the only ANC leader who stood a chance of defeating Zuma, and of keeping South Africa stable. For Mbeki and those around him, the possibility of a Zuma presidency was a scenario far worse than a dream deferred. It would be, in effect, a dream shattered, irrevocably, as South Africa turned into yet another post-colonial kleptocracy; another ‘footprint of despair’ in the path of destruction away from the promises of *uhuru*.

That some people in the ANC family felt this way about other people in the ANC family was a symptom, in and of itself, of the dream deferred.

In her own memoir, Virginia Woolf makes the point that it is 'futile' to write biography if one is not going to find a way of relating the interior life of one's subject – the soul – to its exterior context: society. So as to express the difficulty of such an enterprise, she crafts a compelling metaphor: 'I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream.'<sup>20</sup>

If one of the aims of this book is to record through the story of Thabo Mbeki what has changed rather than what has happened in South Africa, then another is to find the relationship between the fish and the stream; of Mbeki's personal experience of 'the dream deferred', and that of his people as they fought for – and seemingly won – their freedom. But it is, in the end, a story about the fish even if it does try, too, to describe the stream.

'Who is this Thabo Mbeki?' The question, asked by Brian Gilbertson at the launch of Mbeki's book in 1998, has not yet been answered. And yet, this is not in any way a conclusive biography; how could it be, when Mbeki was still in office at the time of publication, and in the midst of so fractious a power struggle? Neither does it attempt to chronicle, in blow-by-blow detail, either the Mbeki presidency or this power struggle. Given that this edition is being published in late 2007, just before the ANC congress that will select Mbeki's successor, it would be folly to attempt such an enterprise. Such work, crucial as it is, is left to the newspapers, and to future historians. Rather than playing out, in detail, the many contentions that have characterised the Mbeki presidency, my aspiration is to offer insight into why he has acted the way he has, by recounting his history, and looking at its impact upon his complex and often confounding political persona.

The eight years of my research and writing have coincided exactly with the first eight years of the Mbeki presidency, and in these years I have undertaken a journey through the landscape of contemporary South Africa. The book might be about the past, but it is set in the present: its structure is that of my journey through the landscape of contemporary South Africa (and the places of Mbeki's exile), as I meet the people and visit the places that bring to life the story of Mbeki, his family, and the extraordinary century of South African history they inhabited – and motivated.

But there is a hook to Woolf's metaphor. If the biographer sets himself up as a fisherman lurking above the stream, reading its eddies and

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assessing its flow all the better to catch his supper, then he has created a certain power relationship with his subject, predicated on the traditional presumption of omniscience.

My starting point is that no biographer can be omniscient, and that the only person who can 'know' Thabo Mbeki's story is Thabo Mbeki himself. What I do, rather, is present you with a narrative made up of the shards and fragments I have collected along my journey; with the perspectives of friends, comrades, relatives and contemporaries who know my subject far better than I ever could. Mbeki's own perspective is paramount among these. Although this is an independent work and not authorised by its subject, he has given me unprecedented co-operation and access: I have had nearly twenty hours of one-on-one interview time with him, over seven sessions, between 1999 and 2007.

It would be disingenuous, of course, to pretend that my own perspective does not drive things. Understanding that biographers or historians are not omniscient means acknowledging one's own subjectivity. The 'I' is present; deliberately so. But I have endeavoured to measure it and balance it with the voices and opinions and subjectivities of others who know Mbeki far better than I do. They exist, as guides and characters in the narrative; rather than providing definitive answers, I convene them, and let them debate with one another, and with me – and with you, the reader.

In the end, we are all fish in the stream of history. Hence Woolf's paradox: how can we possibly know the currents carrying us with such velocity towards the future? There is only one answer: by looking at other fish, and understanding ourselves in relation to them.

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JOHANNESBURG, 1999–2007