

# SMOKY'S STORE

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Sunday mornings in Tentedorp, the champagne flows. People lilt from tent to tent to the rhythm of township vibe, reggae, and American pop. Corks fly off bottles and rings off beer cans, stacked by the dozen in the backs of bakkies. Among chickens and mongrels, men cruise the dusty strip in Mercs and BMWs. Ladies strut in stiletto heels. On a desolate salt pan not far from Namibia, this squatter camp is jiving.

There is cause for celebration. For two years, Tentedorp's 600 black residents – and another 300 in adjacent Bloukamp – have managed to stave off eviction from Port Nolloth. Like the rest of Namaqualand, this fishing and mining town on South Africa's north-western coast is "reserved" for whites and "coloureds" only: 4 000 "coloureds", mostly miners, shop owners and service people, and 500 whites, property owners and diamond divers. The nearest "legal" black settlement is 550 km away.

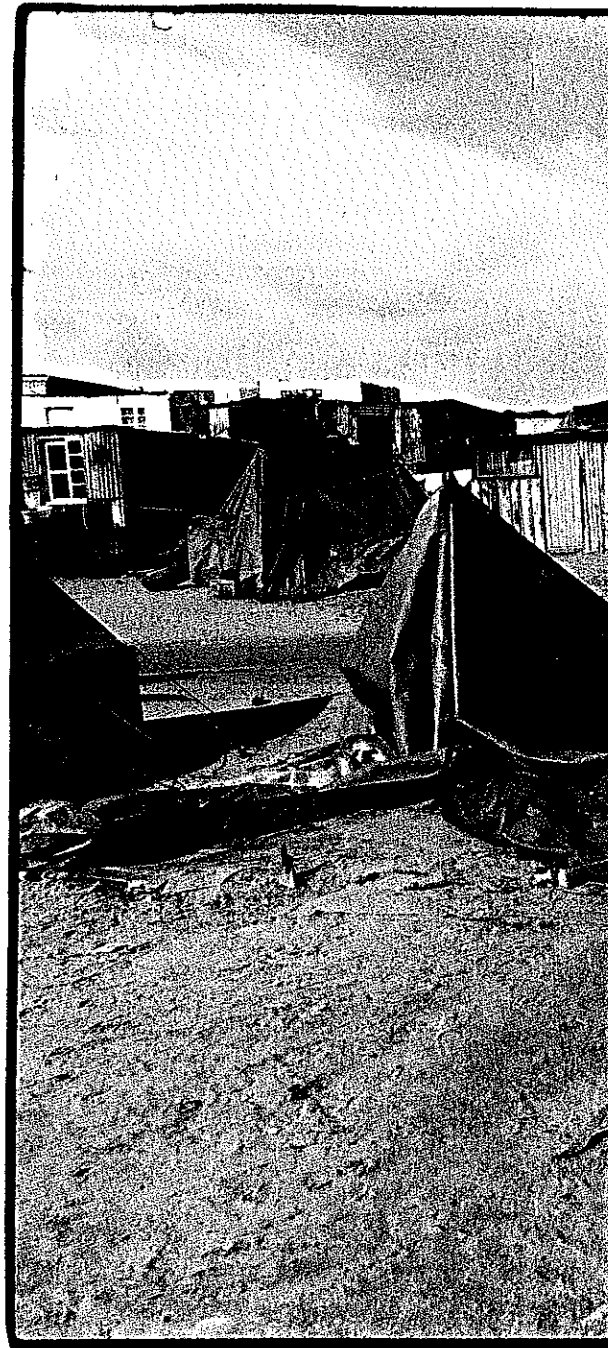
Lengthy tensions came to a head in January last year when the local town council attempted to evict all the squatters and flatten the camps – without offering them any alternative accommodation. The squatters eventually won a Supreme Court order, restraining the municipality from destroying or removing tents or any other structures in the settlements. This was granted on the grounds that the proposed eviction would amount to a "mass deportation", with the victims having nowhere to go.

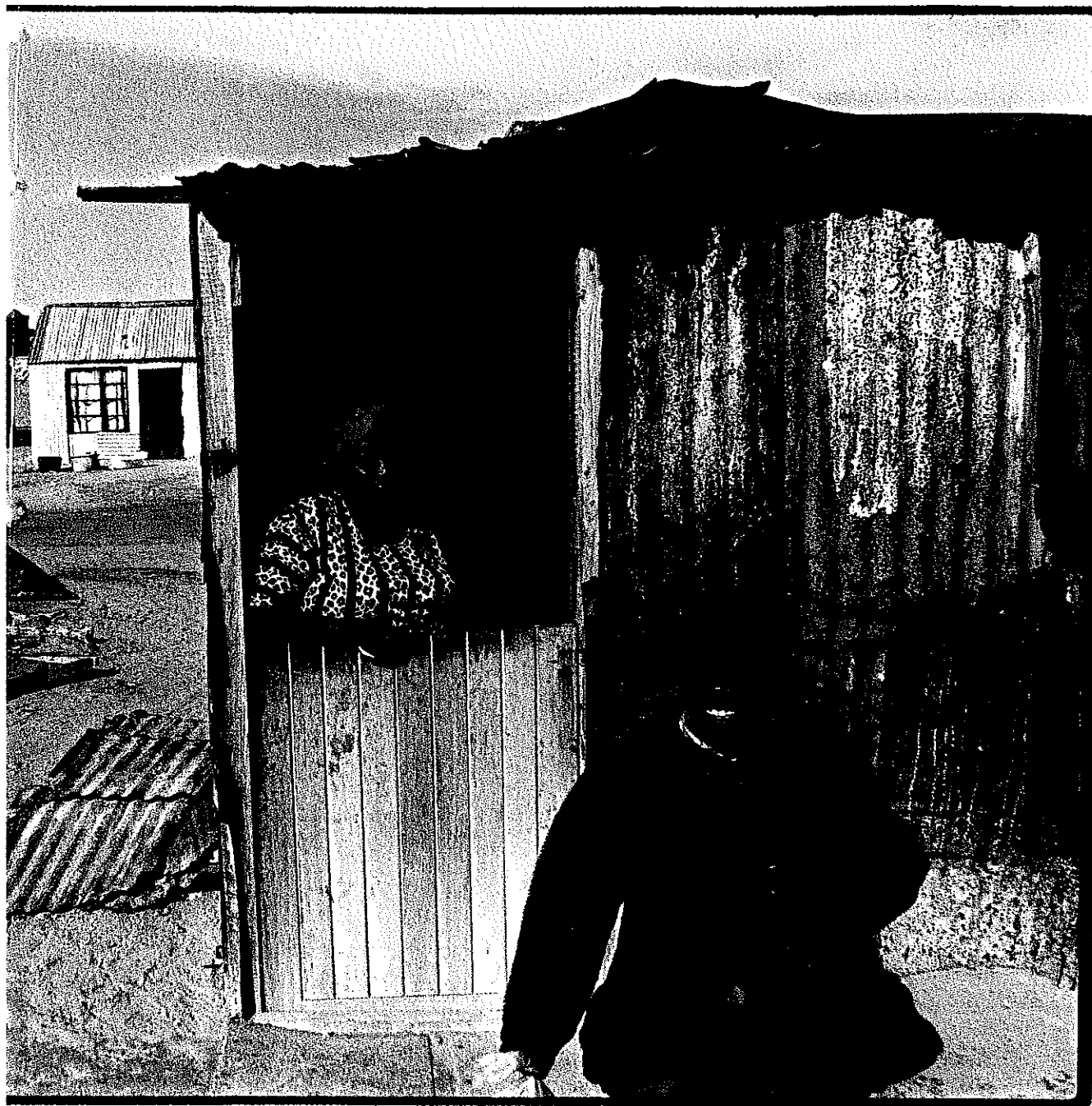
But the municipality is scheming again. On Sep-

tember 13, one of Tentedorp's leaders, Ben Mtetandaba, was served an eviction notice, with threats of more to follow for the whole community. Everyone is waiting. The town council is tight-lipped. But rumours fly about "the green tents" – Port Nolloth's nemesis, scapegoat, and, for some, crusade.

"Our bordello on the salt pan," a local doctor calls it; "an Aids portal to Africa." It's a West Coast Vegas, the social epicentre for migrant labourers from five diamond and copper mines in the area – and home for people who have trekked to Namibia and back looking for one.

"Why am I here? Why is anybody here?" grins James, a beer-toting *sangoma*, summoned all the way





from Malawi to protect the camp. In the hot closeness of his tent, red Merc parked outside, he whispers: "Diamonds . . ."

The most striking thing about Port Nolloth is the space around it – emptiness as far as the eye can see, or rather, low, scrubby dunes and a sea without horizon. The elements are harsh: light and wind cut through the place, over the salt pan one kilometre out of town where Tentedorp and Bloukamp lie; through the bleached cemetery; through the concrete-block homes of Diamond City and Nollothville, where the "coloureds" live; down Main Street, past cafés and car shops to the "white area" – Divers' Row, dubbed "Pipe Row" because of all the dagga smoked there,

and a scattering of Victorian bungalows along the beach. A boom town when diamonds were discovered nearby in 1927, Port Nolloth now looks ghostly.

But appearances deceive. The illicit diamond trade in the area reputedly turns over R60m a year, a wild figure for a once-sleepy outpost for copper mines in the interior. Official unemployment runs high among "coloureds" and higher among blacks – some say 60% – but the diamond market is open to all. Miners from the five local mines, largely Ovambos from Namibia, are said to smuggle out diamonds by swallowing them or tucking them away in body cavities. They pass onto the world market through traders in Windhoek, Johannesburg, or Lesotho. De Beers'

*(Above) Tents go down, shacks go up in the squatter settlement of Tentedorp outside Port Nolloth. Residents have been celebrating their reprieve from a mass forced removal. However, a renewed attempt to evict them may be on the cards.*



*(Above) A Tentedorp resident sweeps the sand in front of her shanty home on a bleak salt pan outside Port Nolloth.*

diamond mining monopoly and 15 alluvial mining concessions (14 private, one state-owned) along the coast get a run for their money, though smugglers have yet to get an angle on diamonds reaped from the sea. "We're *all* in on the diamonds," says one Tentedorp resident. "It's no secret."

Yet, most of them speak of diamonds in hushed tones. A sort of double-speak or code pervades the camp – "you know, I came here to help with my brother's business" – with allusions to large sums of hard cash stashed away. "We don't know why they want us to leave – is it because we're black?" some ask, but most believe that the people behind the attempted removals have more than racist objections to their presence. In a Wild West variant of classic apartheid, they say, certain powerful whites want to run the blacks out of town – away from the diamonds.

"The truth is, we can't afford them," says acting town clerk Jannie van Schalkwyk. "It would cost us millions of rands to make that place liveable. They can't make a living for themselves; there are no jobs here. What jobs there are should go to the coloureds – we need to take care of our own."

"It's a matter of survival," he adds. "Now tell me

the truth. If we had a small piece of bread and your child was starving, and mine was starving, who would you give the bread to?"

Some are less candid. Nick Kotze, Port Nolloth's former mayor who is said to own a large slice of the town, is not fond of reporters. Found unpacking Arabian saddles in the showroom of his bakkie dealership, he tells them to get lost, because they'll write rubbish about how badly the town treats its blacks. Just re-elected to the town council after losing in elections last October, Kotze may play a key role in the squatters' fate. Tentedorp residents say he has business links with their community, with many people buying bakkies from him. All Kotze will say, though, is: "I don't know those people. I don't know their names."

The "nameless" blacks of Tentedorp and Bloukamps are not prepared to join the ranks of the 4m people forcibly relocated in South Africa since the mid-1960s. Their saga is a long one, of being moved around for more than a decade. Many settled in Port Nolloth in 1979, in a mixed-race community; in 1984, after a number of arrests, the blacks were sent packing, north to Noordoewer across the Orange River. They lived on a farm there for two years, but



(Above) Members of a Tentedorp drama group staging a play at the opening of a multi-racial crèche, set up by the people of Tentedorp in association with the local "coloured" community.

then the SADF ran them back to South Africa, to Vioolsdrif. The Cape Provincial Administration (CPA) in Springbok gave them permission to stay in Port Nolloth until April 1987, along with 98 green tents; in January 1988, without finding them an alternative site, the municipality – which owns the land they live on – served them with eviction notices. What followed was a year of tent-snatching, house demolitions, arrests, regular police patrols, water cutoffs, a complex court battle, and intense mobilising of the squatter community by outside activists, a few local supporters, and the people themselves. The saga continues.

"They're just terrorising us," says one Tentedorp leader. Another puts it more bluntly: "Why are they starting this nonsense again? They must just f... off."

Meanwhile, spirits in Tentedorp, the feistier of the two communities, run high. The place is *organised*. Aside from a 20-member residents' committee, there is a street committee to ensure discipline – "keep the place clean, no trouble," one member says – as well as an entertainment committee. Tentedorp has just staged its first play, is rehearsing a second, and is organising a cultural festival for early December,

hoping to draw in several local communities. The Port Nolloth Youth Congress (PNYCO) has been active for over a year. COSATU and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) regularly send representatives to the settlement and promise to call strike action at the local mines should removal be approved. Nineteen local businesses have signed a petition supporting the squatters.

"Coloured" communities locally and at nearby Steinkopf have lent their support. Rev Malcolm Damon, minister of Port Nolloth's Dutch Reformed Church, has linked the squatters with outside networks and summoned both Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak to the community. Once routine meetings now rise to a stirring finale; the strains of *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*, fervent toyi-toying, and cries of "Amandla!" Perhaps more of a landmark: at the opening of Port Nolloth's first non-racial crèche, a "coloured" man paying tribute timidly raised his fist at the end of his speech, eliciting a torrent of "Viva!" from the crowd. Whites were conspicuously absent.

"It's never been the 'coloured' community that has wanted those people to go," says Rev Damon, dubbed "Klein Boesak" by certain suspicious whites. "That's what the whites say – but it's the whites themselves.



(Above) Smoky's Tavern and patron, Tentedorp.

"It's a political struggle – the diamonds are secondary," he adds. "People just don't want blacks in Namaqualand. Obviously the state is behind it, because they could interfere, and they don't. In fact the army has been up here a lot, going around to the schools and handing out pamphlets saying, 'Die Weermag is Jou Vriend'. They're building houses in Concordia, near Springbok. There's talk of putting a nuclear power station up here.

"It's political, and we'll fight it that way, mobilising people here and all over Namaqualand."

Smoky Manxusa, one of many soft-goods traders in Tentedorp, already has his shop's site picked out – "for when we get the land". He stands outside his tent in the stark afternoon light, scanning the salt pan, a sandy depression littered with beer bottles and car wrecks that rear up like broncos. "Right there, that's my place," says Smoky, waving at an empty place. "A two-storey, so I can see the sea."

For now, Smoky lives in tent no 80 with his three dogs, Sissie, Nkosi-patwa, and Tiger. A Xhosa like many others in the community, Smoky came here from Transkei more than a decade ago, looking for better work and life than the "independent homeland" could offer. His last full-time job, as a miner, was in

1977; today he earns R2 000 a month selling clothes, bedcovers and other miscellany, and a bit extra managing his tavern next door. He sees his wife and two children, still in Transkei, once a year.

Smoky invites us to sit on one of two twin beds in the tent, banked around a small crate serving as a table, carrying a primus stove, and two cabinets, one stocked with a few kitchen items, and the other with a broken tape player and "Smoky's Hotel". The latter is a small niche hiding a decanter and two shot-glasses. "What? Empty? Have to push into town to fill this thing."

But first we move to the tavern – a one-room zinc shanty. We sit at a small vinyl-topped table, surrounded by posters of playgirls and two giant speakers, each a metre long. "R1 000 each, from a European in Springbok," Smoky says. He puts on Brenda Fassie's *Too Late for Mama*, which lures hip-swinging customers inside. Soon half a dozen men, women and children are gathered, for a Lion, a single smoke, a cooldrink, paraffin, the music, or a story – one from a man taken from jail and "sold as a slave" to a farmer. "They say we must work," says Smoky. "Fish. Now what can I get from the sea? R80 a month?"



*Smoky calls us into the tavern. Over their Castles and cooldrinks, people are talking about "the play", Tentedorp's first dramatic production.*

In walks the *sangoma*, with a six-pack of Lion. He smiles continuously, as though bewitched himself. "I try my best," he says. "I've been here 18 months; the people, they call me. I already put *muti* in all corners of the camp. The police they know me, but they're afraid of me. And check this!" he says, flashing his identity document. "They gave me a stamp to go into the mines to serve the people!"

Outside the evening is settling in, with people returning from work, paraffin lamps being lit, onions and meat sizzling, the washing lines emptied, a township beat charging the air. It is still quiet, though, compared to the weekend, when local miners – housed in compounds during the week – come home to their families and girlfriends.

Many people summon us in to visit, and we finally stop to see Helen, 24, mother of 14-month-old Tsidi, a member of the Port Nolloth squatter community since 1983. She sits on the floor in near darkness, in her nightdress and *doek*; her friend Ann, smartly dressed, sits on the bed.

"I came up here from Langa with my sister. She was in the business – you know what business," Helen says. "In Langa we were paying rent and rent and rent. My man was in Kimberley, but now he's in jail. Three years – diamonds. I miss him too much. The *Boere* don't know how it is – they go home and man and wife stay together and they have their children with them."

"They think we are baboons," says Ann, a goods trader from Guguletu who came to Tentedorp on a trek back from Namibia. "But even baboons have it better."

We leave for dinner in town, driving slowly through the dust past Bloukamp and Emily "Pom Pom" Vumasonke's place – a six-roomed shack, its roof piled high with bicycles, spare tyres and other castoffs, always fronted by a line-up of cars. Through a dimly lit doorway the probable reason can be discerned: half a dozen ladies, in silky dresses and high heels, lined up on a bed; bottles of champagne on a shelf.

At Mamma's, a beachfront *ristorante* offering fine food and better gossip, the evening crowd assembles: diamond divers and police, mostly; a few other local residents; a stray journalist; occasionally, a passing film star. Proprietress Grazia de Beer – also local exercise doyen, sewing workshop coordinator, and aromatherapy expert – sets the "family table" for her husband Coen, a diver, and guests. She came up from Cape Town two years ago, but only recently set foot in Tentedorp. Now she is helping to organise the regional cultural festival planned for December, and plans to approach Nick Kotze on the squatter issue.

"The municipality is beating a dead horse," Grazia says; "they should just build houses for these people. Not that I feel sorry for them – they come in here and lay R50 notes on the table. You should see the cases of beer, the Magnums of champagne. People need their business – why should we run them out of town?"

Later that evening, Mamma's is visited by the nar-

cotics squad from Springbok, trying to nail Grazia for serving liquor without a licence. Grazia maintains she only serves a complimentary drink with every meal – a gesture of hospitality. The episode ends in the Port Nolloth police station at 11 pm, with two drowsy officers under a bare light bulb, and Grazia telling how she was framed, pleading for lenience. The police intimate they can do nothing, but a drunk-en "coloured" man just hauled in gives his two cents' worth: "The same old story! *The same old story!*"

Back in Tentedorp the next day, the stories continue. Andile, 23, tells of coming from Soweto to organise the youth and evade the police; he also tells how to size up fake stones. Chris, a mine supervisor, speaks of smoking dagga with local whites. Llingington Sonqishe, chairman of the residents' committee, discloses his arrest in Kimberley in 1986, and five-year suspended sentence for diamond smuggling, and narrates how he became a *sangoma* when his grandfather visited him in a dream. "The police are looking for a chance to arrest me," he adds. "But I am not afraid of anything. We can die here – we have nowhere to go."

Farther down the strip, near Smoky's, a crowd toyi-toyis madly, swaying like sea aloes, sucking in all passers-by. "Dance with us!" they say, mostly women, arms waving, enfolding an affirmation of . . . what?

Smoky calls us into the tavern, which is nearly full. Over their Castles and cooldrinks, people are talking about "the play", Tentedorp's first dramatic production recently staged at Rev Damon's church. It tells of a miner who leaves traditional, rural life, comes to a township and falls prey to its lusty, conniving women and *tsotsis*. Life in Tentedorp? "No, man," comes the answer. "This is anywhere."

We talk about what will happen. Though the latest threat of eviction has people on edge, a deeper conviction prevails: the state won't win this one. A structure plan reportedly submitted by the municipality to the provincial authorities, detailing Port Nolloth's future development, does not include blacks. But an independent development group has made recommendations that it do so, and pressure is bound to build up.

Smoky opens "Smoky's Hotel" and takes out the flask of whisky and a shot-glass for a farewell toast. We pass the glass around, refilling it each time. It comes to a silent young man, just up from Jo'burg. "That's Elias," Smoky says. "He's looking for life."

We drive out through the dust, waved at by everyone – from tents, on the street. As we head south and Tentedorp shrinks to the size of scrub in the sand, we fantasize briefly: about the day when Nick Kotze will go to Smoky's Store, two-storey, sea-view, for the best deal in town.