## The Bench\*

even on sidewalks. Whenever a white man appeared, Afri cans were expected to "step aside and make way." white masters everywhere—in jobs, in schools, in shops, and nation. "Natives" were forced to take second place to their suffered by Africans under colonial rule was racial discrimi-[EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: Perhaps the greatest indignity

seems doubly degrading in your own country, on your own skin color is degrading, no matter where it happens. But it target in their attack on colonialism. ral, then, for African nationalists to make racism a prime continent, and at the hands of foreigners. It was quite natu-To be treated like a second-class citizen because of your

is not unlike the awakening that took place throughout ment, but the awakening experienced by Karlie in the story gimes were not so oppressive as the South African governof apartheid, or separation of the races. Most colonial retakes place in South Africa, a country infamous for its policy crimination and decides to do something about it. The story Africa during the drive for independence Karlie, who becomes aware of the injustice of racial dis-"The Bench" is a short story about a young African

African Treasury, by Langston Hughes. © 1960 by Langston Hughes. Used by permission of Crown Publishers, Inc. \* Excerpted from "The Bench," by Richard Rive. Reprinted from An

> one time the South African hurdling champion. He now graduated from the University of Cape Town and was at teaches English and Latin (and coaches track) at a Cape known black writers. Born in 1931 in Cape Town, he was Town high school. The author, Richard Rive, is one of South Africa's best-

As you read "The Bench," think of these questions:

- 0 Why was a "perfectly ordinary" bench so important to
- Why was Karlie cool and the police "hot?"]

(3) What would you do it you were in Karlies place

and economic position at the expense of an enormous opborn black, a society that can only retain its precarious social to an inferior position because he has the misfortune to be very basic right of existence, a society that condemns a man in which a vast proportion of the population is denied the pressed mass!" 'We form an integral part of a complex society, a society

making shorthand notes of the speeches, then turned to stare back at the speaker. . . . Karlie stared at the two detectives who were busily

willfully and deliberately condemn a fellow group to a servile position. We must challenge the right of any people who see tion. Your children are denied the rights which are theirs by fit to segregate human beings solely on grounds of pigmentabirth. They are segregated educationally, socially, econom-"It is up to us to challenge the right of any group who

about. He says I am as good as any other man, even a white Ah, thought, Karlie, that man knows what he is speaking

man. That needs much thinking. I wonder if he means I have the right to go to any bioscope [movie], or eat in any restaurant, or that my children can go to a white school. These are dangerous ideas and need much thinking. . . .

Karlie's brow was knitted as he thought. On the platform were many speakers, both white and black, and they were behaving as if there were no differences of color among them. There was a white woman in a blue dress offering Nxeli a cigarette. . . .

These were new things and he, Karlie, had to be careful before he accepted them. But why shouldn't he accept them? He was not a colored man any more, he was a human being. The last speaker said so. He remembered seeing pictures in the newspapers of people who defied laws which relegated them to a particular class, and those people were smiling as they went to prison. This was a queer world.

The speaker continued and Karlie listened intently. He spoke slowly, and his speech was obviously carefully prepared. This is a great man, thought Karlie. . . .

The meeting was almost over when Karlie threaded his way through the crowd. The words of the speakers were still milling through his head. It could never happen in Bietjiesvlei. Or could it? The sudden screech of a car pulling to a stop whirled him back to his senses. A white head was thrust angrily through the window.

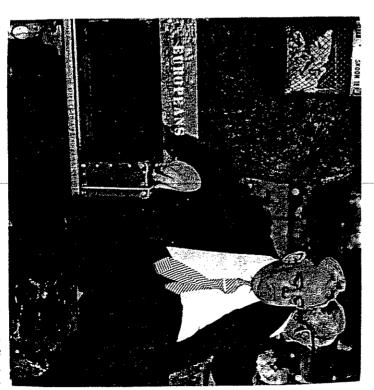
"Look where you're going, you black bastard!"

Karlie stared dazedly at him. Surely this white man never heard what the speakers had said. He could never have seen the white woman offering Nxeli a cigarette. He could never imagine the white lady shouting those words at him. It would be best to catch a train and think these things over.

He saw the station in a new light. Here was a mass of

Here they mixed with one another, yet each mistrusted the other with an unnatural fear, each treated the other with suspicion, moved in a narrow, haunted pattern of its own. One must challenge these things, the speaker had said . . . in one's own way. Yet how in one's own way? How was one to challenge? Suddenly it dawned upon him. Here was his challenge! The bench. The railway bench with "Europeans Only" neatly painted on it in white. For one moment it symbolized all the misery of the plural South African society.

Here was his challenge to the rights of a man. Here it



This bench for Europeans symbolizes the apartheid system of racial discrimination still practiced in South Africa. Independence brought an end to such practices in the former colonies.

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stood. A perfectly ordinary wooden railway bench, like thousands of others in South Africa. His challenge. That bench now had concentrated in it all the evils of a system he could not understand and he felt a victim of. It was the obstacle between himself and humanity. If he sat on it, he was a man. If he was afraid he denied himself membership as a human being in a human society. He almost had visions of righting this pernicious system, if he only sat down on that bench. Here was his chance. He, Karlie, would challenge.

He seemed perfectly calm when he sat down on the bench, but inside his heart was thumping wildly. Two conflicting ideas now throbbed through him. The one said, "I have no right to sit on this bench." The other was the voice of a new religion and said, "Why have I no right to sit on this bench?" The one voice spoke of the past, of the servile position he had occupied on the farm, of his father and his father's father who were born black, lived like blacks, and died like mules. The other voice spoke of new horizons and said, "Karlie, you are a man. You have dared what your father and your father's father would not have dared. You will die like a man."

Karlie took out a cigarette and smoked. Nobody seemed to notice his sitting there. This was an anticlimax. The world still pursued its monotonous way. No voice had shouted, "Karlie has conquered!" He was a normal human being sitting on a bench in a busy station, smoking a cigarette. Or was this his victory: the fact that he was a normal human being? A well-dressed white woman walked down the platform. Would she sit on the bench? Karlie wondered. And then that gnawing voice, "You should stand and let the white woman sit!" Karlie narrowed his eyes and gripped tighter at his cigarette. She swept past him without the slightest twitch of an eyelid and continued walking down the platform. Was

she afraid to challenge—to challenge his right to be a human being? Karlie now felt tired. A third conflicting idea was now creeping in, a compensatory idea which said, "You sit on this bench because you are tired; you are tired, therefore you sit." He would not move because he was tired, or was it because he wanted to sit where he liked? . . .

"Get off this seat!"

Karlie did not hear the gruff voice. . .

"I said get off the bench, you swine!" Karlie suddenly whipped back to reality. For a moment he was going to jump up, then he remembered who he was and why he was sitting there. He suddenly felt very tired. He looked up slowly into a very red face that stared down at him.

"Get up!" it said. "There are benches down there for you." Karlie looked up and said nothing. He stared into a pair of

sharp, gray cold eyes.
"Can't you hear me speaking to you? You black swine!"
Slowly and deliberately Karlie puffed at the civarette. This

Slowly and deliberately Karlie puffed at the cigarette. This was his test. They both stared at each other, challenged with the eyes, like two boxers, each knowing that they must eventually trade blows yet each afraid to strike first.

"Must I dirty my hands on scum like you?"

Karlie said nothing. To speak would be to break the spell, the supremacy he felt was slowly gaining.

An uneasy silence, then: "I will call a policeman rather than soil my hands on a Hotnot [Hottentot, savage] like you. You can't even open up your black jaw when a white man speaks to you."

Karlie saw the weakness. The white man was afraid to take action himself. He, Karlie, had won the first round of the bench dispute.

A crowd had now collected. . . . Karlie merely puffed on.

"Look at the black ape. That's the worst of giving these enough rope."

"I can't understand it. They have their own benches!"

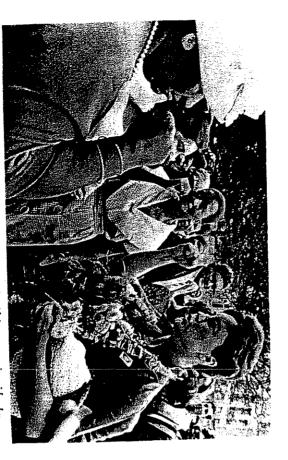
"Don't get up! You have every right to sit there!"

"He'll get up when a policeman comes!"

more impertinent . . . "I've said before, I've had a native servant once, and a

to determination. Under no condition was he going to get up They could do what they liked Karlie sat and heard nothing. Irresolution had now turned "So this is the fellow, eh! Get up there! Can't you read?"

the crest on his buttons and the wrinkles in his neck The policeman was towering over him. Karlie could see



side with Africans to eliminate racial discrimination. Here a white woman, Mary Anderson, garlanded in farewell flowers, gives the unity sign as she As "The Bench" indicates, some whites in South Africa struggle side by the rights of black South Africans leaves her friends to serve a prison term for distributing literature advocating

"What is your name and address? Come on!"

policeman rather unawares. The crowd was growing every minute. Karlie still maintained his obstinate silence. It took the

ner!" It was the white lady in the blue dress. "You have no right to speak to this man in such a man-

they're as good as white men. Get up, you!" The last remark it. It's people like you who make these kaffirs was addressed to Karlie. "Mind your own business! I'll ask your help when I need think

"I insist that you treat him with proper respect."

The policeman turned red.

"This . . . this . . ." He was lost for words

tator. Rudely a white man laid hands on Karlie. "Kick up the Hotnot if he won't get up!" shouted a spec-

cling to the bench, his bench. There was more than one man clapped a pair of handcuffs on him and tried to clear a way now and wild-eyed. He would fight for it. The constable as somebody rammed a fist into his face. He was bleeding pulling at him. He hit out wildly and then felt a dull pain turn to smile. He had challenged and won. Who cared through the crowd. Karlie still struggled. A blow or two his feet. It was useless to fight any longer. Now it was his landed on him. Suddenly he relaxed and slowly struggled to [about] the rest? "Get up, you bloody bastard!" Karlie turned to resist, to

through the crowd. "Come on, you swine!" said the policeman forcing Karlie

on a "European bench." the policeman with all the arrogance of one who dared to sit 'Certainly!" said Karlie for the first time. And he stared at