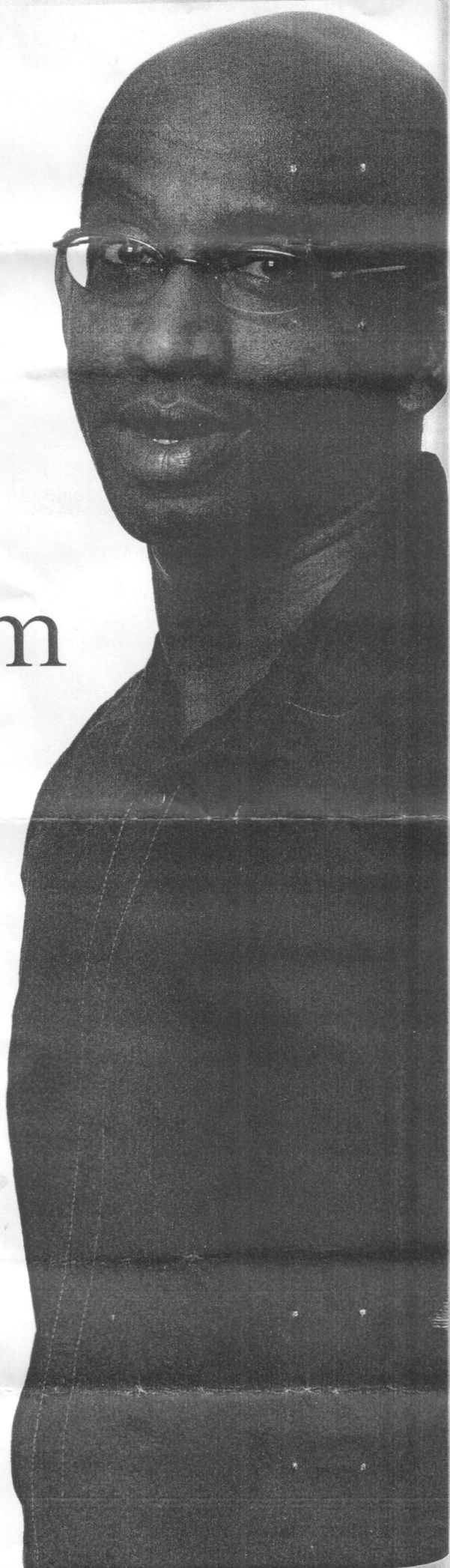
Ronald Suresh Roberts

Mondli in my bedroom



It's tough being viewed as a sex object, especially when it's by elements of the local press.

Controversial *Sunday Times* editor Mondli Makhanya recently sent a young white female journalist to quiz me about my supposed racial preferences in bed. At 4:30pm on Saturday, 17 November, an apologetic Henriette Geldenhuys, whom I had and have never met, called me. She hectically repeated the word "hectic", as she pursued this peculiar work. "I have to ask you some hectic stuff. Sorry. Jeez ... Hectic!"

Her task was to recycle the loony allegations of Anthony Brink, a self-published gentleman who denies that HIV causes AIDS, denies that AIDS exists, agitates against condom use and admires David Irving, the British Holocaust denier.

Geldenhuys read aloud from the piece Andrew Donaldson had written and filed with no comments from me: "Brink suggests that Roberts will sleep only with white women because he sincerely believes black women are infected with the 'sex-death' virus. As he puts it: 'Like nearly all whites who read the newspapers and watch TV, Roberts fervently believes that you can die about a decade after making love with a woman without a condom, especially an African woman, because he thinks women, particularly African women, harbour death in the form of miniature invisible demons in the place most guys like being most. Roberts really believes this.'"

The published piece reflected the comment Geldenhuys belatedly got: "Roberts said it was important to note that Brink was not purporting to quote him and was making his own false assumptions. 'Because I said AIDS is in part due to poverty, he deduced that it means Roberts is saying it's more risky to sleep with poor women and because most poor women are black, he deduced that I didn't want to sleep with black women. That's not what I said. What's the public interest in this?'"

As Stanley Cavell wrote in *The Claim of Reason* (1979): "The preparedness to listen to what you cannot imagine the talker's caring about... is the degree to which you consign yourself to nonsensicality, stupefy yourself." Cavell continued: "It does not appear unthinkable that the bulk of an entire culture, call it the public discourse of the culture, the culture thinking aloud about itself, hence believing itself to be talking philosophy, should become ungovernably inane." A newspaper that cannot tell pornography from public interest is indeed ungovernably inane.

Makhanya's blogging colleague Sarah Britten has cyber-stalked me for years on the *Mail & Guardian*'s chat forum using the pseudonym "Marmite". She mused tenderly upon my testicles on the *Sunday Times* website, doubtless in the public interest: "I am trying to picture somebody hugging RSR's nuts and I just can't. It's not anatomically possible. You could fondle them between your forefinger and thumb, perhaps, cup them in your palm... but hug them?" (29 August). Three weeks earlier, Britten had mused: "How does RSR find the time to be an incubus for so many South Africans?" (4 August). An incubus is a male demon that shags sleeping women.

Britten, a married lady, did not carry out her tryst with my testicles on her own home page but instead at the comments facility (the metaphorical motel room?) of Fred Khumalo's *Sunday Times* blog. Khumalo squealed, ecstatic: "Oh, Sarah, I think you should quote yourself in your next book: 'I am trying to picture somebody hugging

RSR's nuts... etc.'" And last June the daily *The Times* published a comment supposedly "overheard at the Cape Town Book Fair": "He [Roberts] may be unlikeable, but he's eminently shaggable."

Why does a newspaper that claims I am "loathed" also compulsively sexualise me, even forcing a professionally discomfiting assignment upon a female journalist, namely Geldenhuys? It's the old paradox of colonialism's hide-and-seek sexuality. The Madam hates the jazzman but loves the jazz and can't always stop the two coming together, so to speak. "Mention Ronald Suresh Roberts ... and the chattering classes come running," Britten wrote, apparently blind to her own Freudian punning. Britten confessed: "I used to quite like RSR, in fact. Ten years ago and more, he used to hang around [sic] gatherings of liberals... and he always had a snide

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comment or two about what the liberals were up to." (8 August).

I don't remember Britten and never "hung around" such events. But colonial reverie needn't be reliable. Fantasy is its point. In a pregnant irony (so to speak), Gerald Early's *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation* was one of the last books I bought in Manhattan in 1994, before boarding the plane to Johannesburg. It would assist Britten in self-discovery.

Makhanya's colleague Justice Malala says I am a "mentally deranged Trinidadian" with a tendency "to hurl insults at anyone who has refused to give him a shag..." (*Empire*, December, 2007). Huh? *Empire's* fact-checkers remain mystified by Malala's claim, but I am not because Malala – an administrator of several ladies' magazines – is a peddler of colonial fantasies to Britten and her ilk. He's just doing his job.

Finally, why is Brink himself so coy about his anger? "Quite how or why the two men fell out is unclear," the *Weekender* wrote. During Fred Khumalo's "Sureshmylitis" (his self-described dizzying obsession with me), he joked that people had been asking him whether he and I had fallen out over a woman. Khumalo's joke is Brink's reality.

Here's how it happened: as I headed to New York a year ago, Brink emailed a glamorous Manhattan journalist of Swedish and Jewish ancestry whom he had, with manic fruitlessness, pursued for six years: "I explicitly warned [Roberts] at our farewell dinner before his flight out that if he beds you I will certainly kill him. And I mean this. Do you want this on your conscience?"

"I THINK Brink's last email was a joke," I replied. I headlined the email (Brink's last ever from me) "Emmet Till", alluding to the black

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teenager who was murdered in Mississippi in 1955 as punishment for saying "Bye, baby" to a white woman in a shop.

Ms Manhattan's wry reply: "Well, if we're to be denied falling into an immediate sex frenzy when you arrive, as was my plan, I suppose I could take you to the Statue of Liberty on a cold, slow boat, and we can review the Constitution together... or talk about your country. I must admit I love it when Brink threatens to kill men over me. You rarely get that kind of thing around here."

Brink persisted, beseeching her not to meet me. She ignored him – unlike Makhanya, who's apparently Brink's new best friend.

Ronald Suresh Roberts is a commentator on the South African political scene and author of the book Fit to Govern: The Native Intelligence of Thabo Mbeki. *The Statue of Liberty is on his agenda the next time he's in New York.*