

ALWAYS
ANOTHER
COUNTRY

A MEMOIR OF EXILE AND HOME



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The violence

Nikki is standing outside our house. S—now eighteen months old—is in her pram. Nikki is wearing walking shoes and a hat. S wears a bonnet and a pink dress. A man gets out of a car and approaches them. He pretends that he is asking for directions and Nikki obliges. Then suddenly he is standing too close to Nikki. He is pointing a gun at them and saying that he wants her phone or he will shoot them both.

The jacarandas kiss overhead. The sky is a spring blue.

Nikki pushes the pram into the street, away from the sidewalk where he is standing with the weapon, leering at them. On our pretty street, she screams and tries to flag down a passing car. The car swerves to avoid her, the driver's mouth a shocked O. She persists, scared that she is going to be hit by oncoming traffic, but even more fearful of the young man with the gun in the shadows. The next car she flags down stops. The driver opens the door, sees the guy on the sidewalk,

and threatens him with his own gun. The assailant disappears. The Good Samaritan makes sure that they are okay and quickly gets back in his car.

I am in the office. Just before lunch, the phone rings. 'Come home now,' Simon says. He is trying to sound calm, which panics me. 'Everything is okay,' he says to reassure me. And then there is a catch, a sharp intake of breath. 'But you should get here.' I arrive and the story rushes out in a pallid tumble.

As she watches us and hears the story retold, as she looks at our worried faces miming what has just happened, the baby vomits. I mark the moment in my heart. She is too small to know what has happened but she is old enough to understand. I want to fall to my knees and weep, but I cannot do that because I am a mother now and this is not the moment for weeping. In the face of this, my tears will not protect her.

Compared to other tales of crime and gore in South Africa, this is not really a story at all. It falls into the category of 'it could have been worse'. A glinting gun pointed at the soft skull of a baby girl on a warm day in a quiet Johannesburg neighbourhood only makes the headlines if someone pulls the trigger.

The sun filters into the room, a deceptively soft yellow. We hold the baby tighter and we wonder how we will live in this strange place we love, this place that seems not to know how to be loved in return.



A week later my colleague and friend Alpheus Molefe is found at 4 a.m., dead in his car. He is the victim of a botched hijacking. He leaves a wife and a daughter, thirteen-year old Princess. She is beautiful, soft-spoken, bewildered.

Her mother sits stoic in their Katlehong house as mourners pour in. Alpheus was a people's man—always busy, always making connections. The president of the American philanthropic foundation

for which I work sends his condolences when he hears the news. He remembers him personally. Alpheus was our driver, but he was also our ambassador: earning a diploma in tourism, getting a certificate in tour guiding, spending weekends regaling our visitors from the US and Europe with his stories of life under apartheid. He stood for many of the things we tried to instil in our staff in the Johannesburg office.

I do not know what to do with myself. I am the boss of the organisation. There are eighty of us in shock and all eyes are on me. I sit in my office and cry. I go home and look at my baby, and cry.

In a quiet moment at the house, in the days before the funeral, one of my colleagues looks at Princess and asks, 'How are you?'

She responds wisely: 'Outside I am okay, but inside I am broken.'

It is a refrain that comes back repeatedly in the months that follow as Simon and I begin the slow dance of deciding.

Alpheus's death is senseless and tragic and of course entirely logical within the context of inequality and need and the legacy of brutality that South Africa hasn't managed to confront directly. I want to give up. I feel like the whites who whinge about crime on the radio. I become obsessed with everything that is failing and yet I find it impossible to walk away.



Mummy stops by constantly. She phones the nanny several times a day to check on her. For months after the near miss, she cannot stop thinking about what happened. She orders us to buy a new house, preferably one that is inside the gated community where she and my father live. This is an instruction we cannot obey.

Baba is equally worried but his prescription is worse. 'If I were your age,' he says to Simon in the way that men sometimes do when they must take charge, 'I would pack up my bags, take my family and leave this place.'

For a while there is a ban on walking in the neighbourhood but this is absurd and everyone is miserable. Mummy is the originator and primary enforcer of this rule. She does drop-ins to ensure Nikki isn't outside with S. She often whisks S away to her house on weekends, as though the bigger gates and complicated security system will keep her only grandchild safe. After a few months we begin to defy her. Staying inside is making us all bad-tempered. The child likes the street and the neighbours and the barking dogs.

'We can't live in a cage,' we say to each other resentfully when Mummy is not around, angry at each other although none of this is either one's fault. Still, we are not brave enough to say anything to my mother's face. After all, her fears are well founded and her vigilance is necessary.

The Incident forces us to retreat into our privilege. The house becomes unbearable. We talk feverishly every night. We are convinced we must leave. But then we laugh at ourselves, hysteria tingeing our conversations. Why would we leave this house and where would we go? We can't afford to sell and we hate the idea of living in a gated community. We are stuck.

We are careful not to say anything aloud but my interior monologue is bleak. I feel like all those whites we have been mocking for years—the ones who have fled to Australia and Canada and the UK and who Facebook obsessively about South Africa's horrors. Except we are still here.

We talk through how we would live with ourselves if anything were to happen to S. We remind ourselves that something already has, but that we were just lucky. The questions we ask ourselves are real and shameful and life-changing.

A year passes. We recover. Somewhat. We accept that the pretty little home we joyously imagined we would settle into like bricks will not be our last home. We stay.

The house no longer feels like home but the stoicism of Johannesburg has settled itself into our bones and we ignore the fact that we have been betrayed by our dreams. We don't trust ourselves any longer. We are not sure who we can trust. We cleave closer together. We turn our backs against the outside. We question not just the country but the entire enterprise. South Africa has failed us. Our sense of who and where we are is in flux.

The violence creates despondency. We blame it for everything. It is the fault of the violence that Dipuo failed her final year and cannot matriculate. We pay for her to go to a special college where she will be coached for the rewrite. She fails more dismally the second time: 4 per cent in maths, 19 per cent in English, despite her born-free fluency.

Then Aunty's Lizzie dies of Aids. Aunty and Julia double down, grannies becoming mothers again. Moeketsi, their eight-year old grandson, is devastated. His mother is gone and he is too young to reject the old women. Still, he is old enough to remember his mother's love and to know that he is angry with her for dying.

The longer we live with Nikki and Dipuo, the more their lives seem to unravel. We find ourselves mired in a patronising relationship that is both of our own doing and of theirs. We have still not fully understood that we are enmeshed, that we are in the belly of the beast.

Within a few months of Alpheus's death and The Incident, Nikki tells us she is pregnant.

A few months after that I am pregnant too. As winter approaches, our bellies grow. Nikki is excited about having her first baby. Dipuo is thrilled she will be an aunt. S will have two babies to play with. I am worried. Will I have postpartum depression again? How will I survive a second child and S with Nikki having just become a new mother? She will just be returning from maternity leave and will have to face nursing her own child as well as caring for mine once I go back to the office. I am concerned she might be distracted by her own baby.

Yes, I think these thoughts—African feminist madam that I am. I worry about myself far more than I worry about Nikki, who, in any other circumstances, I would call a sister. She has, after all, provided a warm pair of hands into which S has leapt every morning. She has given S love and laughter. She has worried about her when she was sick, as though she were her own child. She darted into the street, risking her own life, for this child of mine. And I am concerned about the inconvenience I might be caused by her decision to exercise one of her most fundamental rights—that of having a child.

I am betraying my class status and I don't like myself this way. I am the girl on the bike again, angry with the boy who has the audacity to take what he needs.

So I focus on the joy. I acknowledge that I feel strong and capable. I focus on fortifying myself, because using Nikki as a crutch is not a sustainable way to live my life anyway, let alone the fact that it places an undue burden on her.

I fortify myself and think it would be nice for me to be there for Nikki the way she has been for me. This logic is twisted, of course, shot through with paternalism and condescension and liberal sopiness. I am ignoring the financial relationship that exists between us—the fact that she loves S in the context of a job. It is hard to know what to do with this sometimes.



Nikki goes into labour at home. At first none of us is sure but, as night falls, it becomes clear what is happening. She packs her bag and Simon drives her to the hospital. The baby is born after too many hours of labour. Nikki does it alone. My pregnancy is advanced by now and I can't be there. Dipuo can't handle it. Nikki is strong and healthy, though, and the boy is beautiful. She names him Ofense.

A few days after delivering, Nikki is not feeling well. She is having

difficulty breathing so she has to go back to hospital. Again, Simon takes her. This time it is complicated. Simon walks with her into the overcrowded emergency room at Johannesburg General. The nurses are harried and the doctors are busy. There is no feeling of concern here. There are bodies—most of them black—in various states of disease and pain. Except for Simon's, there are no white faces in room. After waiting an eternity Simon stands up. Nikki and the baby are distraught, the pain in her chest is getting worse, her breathing is laboured.

He strides to the front of the line like a white saviour and miraculously help appears. 'How can I help, sir?' asks a junior doctor. He is black. Simon points to Nikki. 'She needs help. We have been here for hours. What is going on here? She has a baby, she can't breathe, and no one is telling us how long it will be until we might see a doctor.'

The doctor defers. 'Of course, sir.' They usher Nikki in. She has the protection of a white man so she is no longer simply a ghost.

They treat and discharge her quickly. They give her a Panadol and tell her if the pain persists she should come back. Simon tries but they have reached the limits of their patience with him too.

Unsurprisingly, in the coming few days the symptoms persist. This time we call our family doctor and she makes a few calls so that we do not need to take her back to Johannesburg General. She tells us to go to Rahima Moosa Mother and Child Hospital. She gives us the name of a consulting doctor there so that we aren't turned away. Here, they are kinder. They tend to her. They admit her because it is clear she has a clot in her lung—likely caused by the trauma of the delivery. They monitor her and give her medicine to dissolve the clot.

They let the baby stay in hospital with her, which is a relief. Still, when she returns she needs care. We talk about how important it will be for her to have medical aid—especially with a baby. I investigate the options, my guilt propelling me to get organised. I can't believe we didn't think of this. All that time we were busy with driving lessons and

spending money on Dipuo's bridging course, but we hadn't even covered the basics. I don't say what is really on my mind, though, and what is on hers. That life is not fair, that I would never have found myself in that hospital, waiting and waiting. That the birth of my boy in a few months' time will be luxurious in comparison. I don't say that my forgetting about her medical aid was an act of complicity rather than a simple mistake. I forgot because it is easy to forget about ghosts, even when they wash your clothes and bathe your child and live in your house.



Nikki stays upstairs for most of her maternity leave. We have a temporary nanny—Sandra—who comes daily. When Nikki comes back from maternity leave, though, she is different. She is distracted—obviously by motherhood, but also by a romantic relationship with the baby's father that seems to be going off the rails. She has been seeing him in an on-again, off-again way for many years.

He has also simultaneously been in other relationships. She worries constantly about what his straying will mean for her. What it might mean for the baby. She can't trust him but she loves him.

'It's the lying that I don't like, Sonke.' Time and again she says this to me. Time and again she cries.

I have been here before and I tell her this. 'It's not about him—it's about what you will tolerate, Nikki.'

She nods each time I say this, but she does not seem prepared to leave him yet. We are close—as we have always been. The banter is light. The excitement of this baby—and the new one coming, also a boy—fills our little house with a hum it has not had before. I feel closer to Nikki than ever. When she first arrived, I needed her desperately. Knowing S was with her made me feel safe. She reassured me. That feeling is raw and powerful. Now I feel as though we know each other, as though we are ready to share this next phase of our lives together.

I forget about reality. I immerse myself in fantasy. I forget that I am living in a neighbourhood defined by ancient boundaries. I forget Nikki grew up in Soweto, defined as much by those boundaries as if she had been born on Congo Road. I forget that the heart of whiteness beats as strongly as ever in our little house—regardless of what I want to think. It is fitting, then, that in the end it is a lie that unravels us. Everything comes crashing down because of a stupid little lie.



Mummy is home. She is clutching S and her face is drawn. Something is wrong.

She shows me a small burn mark on S's leg. It is about the size of a coin. 'Look at this,' she says.

'What happened?' I ask both her and S at the same time.

'I burned,' says S in her little lispy voice. I want to smile even though I am worried.

'How?' I ask.

'The iron,' she says.

'Where?'

'In Nikki's room.'

'Sorry,' I say. 'Did it hurt?'

'A lot,' she says tearing up.

I take her in my arms. 'That's okay—I'm sure Nikki made it feel better.'

'She wasn't here,' says S.

'Where was she?'

She shakes her head. She doesn't know where Nikki was.

'So were you with Puo?' I ask, surprised.

She nods yes.

Mummy stage whispers to me, ostensibly so S can't hear. 'Something fishy is going on. When I arrived Nikki was here. The first thing

S did was tell me this same story. Then Nikki says the child is lying. How can a two-year-old know how to lie? Not about something so detailed like this?’

I’m puzzled but not alarmed. Accidents happen all the time. So S accidentally brushed her leg against an iron that may have been on the carpet upstairs in Nikki’s room. Not a huge deal. The girls would need to be more careful. Mummy tells me to call Nikki so we can get to the bottom of this. Her Gogo antennae are out, feeling for danger.

I call Nikki downstairs. I am not angry, only puzzled. ‘What happened?’ I ask.

‘I don’t know,’ she says.

‘S says you weren’t here and she walked into an iron.’

‘No, I’ve been here all afternoon. She was upstairs while I was preparing her.’

Now I’m really confused.

Mummy pipes up.

‘*Yey wena*, Nikki. Are you sure about this story? Because it doesn’t sound right. Why would a child lie?’

Nikki looks at us both and doesn’t skip a beat. She is equally confused and I believe her. This is a strange mystery, one of those things where a child simply can’t tell you for sure what has transpired because she is too little to articulate it fully.

‘Okay,’ I say. ‘Anyway, it’s just a small thing, no real damage.’

Mummy is livid. After Nikki leaves she says to me, ‘You are too soft. You can’t go through life with this mentality that you’re going to save everyone and listen to all their stories. This girl is lying and your child is going to pay the price.’

‘Mummy, you don’t have to be so suspicious of everyone,’ I retort. ‘I’m tired. There’s no big deal. S is okay. Please, let’s just leave it.’

Mummy is not impressed. She had popped in just to see the baby, but now she decides to stay until bedtime. She puts S to sleep. Tonight,

her actions are not animated by her usual grandmotherly bustling. Tonight, she is taking charge. Clearly I'm not capable.

In the bedroom Mummy goes over the story with S again. 'What happened with your leg today, Beanie?'

S repeats the story. She is remarkably consistent. She doesn't seem to be confused. It is only me and her Gogo who have doubts. I go to sleep confused. Nothing about this story makes sense.

Where was Nikki? If she wasn't home and had run quickly to the shops, so what?

The following day I can't stop thinking about it. I sit in meeting after meeting, but I am distracted.

Mummy calls me three times to ask what I am going to do. I snap at her. Then Aunty Eunice messages me. She wasn't working yesterday but Lala's mother from next door—who gossips with Aunty all the time—told her Nikki was gone most of the afternoon. She took the small car we had bought for her to take S to playdates, and had only been in the house for a few minutes when Mummy had come home. I was grateful to Aunty for her intel but irritated at Mummy's meddling. Mummy must have called Aunty to tell her the story and to find out what else she knew.

The old women are clearly worried. Their mission is to protect the innocent S from these two young women who don't seem to know what they are doing. This includes protecting her from me, her mother—who believes everything she's told because of her soft exile heart.

Driving home, I decide I will go straight upstairs to the flat and ask Nikki and Dipuo what happened. I want to hear Nikki tell the truth herself. I pull into the garage and Nikki runs down the stairs. She meets me as I get out of the car. Her face is taut.

I am pregnant and heavy so I get out of the car slowly.

I am barely out when she starts. The story rushes out. She tells me she wasn't gone for only a few minutes. She says she was downstairs

cleaning S's room so she decided to leave S with Dipuo for forty minutes. Ofense was on her back. She didn't want me and Simon to get angry with Dipuo. She says because we have been so upset about Dipuo's poor school results, she thought maybe this would be the final straw.

My heart sinks. She is lying. 'Let's go inside,' I say.

We go to the TV room and I close the door.

I force myself to be tough. I tell myself Nikki is a person, an adult, not a project requiring my bleeding-heart, do-gooder sympathy. She is not telling the truth and if I am going to trust her with S again, and with this new child who is due in less than a week, I need to know what she is hiding.

I tell Nikki I know she wasn't at home when S burned herself. I tell her I know she took the car out and was gone for hours. I hate saying this because I now look as though I have been snooping, checking up and asking the neighbours. Still, I am grateful to Mummy and Aunty for their own lack of trust, for their ability to do the dirty work my liberal principles will not let me undertake.

I tell her I wish she knew she could be honest. I tell her the burn on S's leg means nothing—it will heal and it was an accident, of that I am sure. But the lie. The lie is devastating.

She looks at me for a long time. She looks as though she is thinking, trying to find a way out, an angle to push.

'Where were you?' I ask.

She refuses to answer. Even now, given the chance, she won't tell me the truth. I finally see that she has never trusted us enough simply to say, 'I need to go to town. Is it okay if I leave the baby with Dipuo?' It is this that defeats me in the end. I feel as though Simon and I were marks: we were gullible and silly, and now I see that we were never the big brother and sister we thought we were.

She says sorry. She looks down. It doesn't sound genuine. The words bounce off the walls and land at my feet. I want to kick them

away, to pretend they are stones on the road I can simply ignore. She is not saying sorry about the many times she has left S for hours on end with her distracted sister. She is not saying sorry for anything because she really isn't sorry. I see it there, shining through, as I have so many times before: she resents me and she is sorry she got caught but she is not sorry she left work time and again. She is saying sorry because it's the right thing to do and perhaps she still hopes there is some way out.

There isn't. She still thinks I will be soft—the way I always am—but something in me has been crushed.

I say to her, 'You need to leave. I can't trust you any more. I don't understand why you are still not telling me the truth.' She cries but the next day they pack up. They are gone. Just. Like. That.



Nikki was the walking wounded. Her survival depended on both her capacity to love and her capacity to play the system. As much as she had given us—stability and nurturing and the joy of not worrying about our child's emotional safety in those precious early years—she had also taken advantage of us. She had seen our kindness as a sort of sweet foolishness, as something that could be exploited when necessary because it was born of our horror at our own complicity in inequality.

Many of her manipulations were understandable, given the world that she had had to navigate. Still, her lies shattered the tenuous peace in our home. After Nikki and Dipuo left, Simon—with his kind heart—kept in touch with them on our behalf.

Even now, with so much time behind us, I am still hurt. Simon shows me their pictures on Facebook and they all look well. I rarely say anything. I just look. I am happy for them but it still hurts. I am not proud of myself but this is how I feel. I am not over it because it was a betrayal that cut to the core of everything I thought I was—fair and

kind and generous and not like the other madams in Emmarentia. But in her actions, and in my response to those actions, I proved that I was just like the other madams. I was self-involved and blind to what I did not want to see.

Nikki held S through the worst days of my depression. I leaned on her emotionally, even though I never told her. She could see, though, how badly I was doing and how much I needed her. And she stood firm. She was there in the morning, with her hands warm and ready to take the baby so I could catch up on the sleep I had not been able to get the night before. She cradled her when I was exhausted and despondent.

So there should be no issue. She lied, yes, but in the grand scheme of things, was her offence—which she never admitted, but which others were happy to fill in the details about—so bad? She left work to see her boyfriend. She left to try to work things out. She left S in the care of her dizzy, but ultimately reliable, little sister.

I can't forgive her, though. I feel like a fool. I am disappointed in Nikki because she saw through me. I hate her for it for a while—for seeing me as I have not wanted to see myself, as a rich woman, as an employer. I have seen myself as Alice in Wonderland, a naïf, innocent and pure, discovering a land in which nothing is as it seems. It turns out I am also not what I seem to be. I'm disappointed in myself because I could not even see how self-centred I was.

Our falling-out is a proxy, of course—a stand-in for a greater battle. I have gradually fallen out of love with the ANC and now my doubts spread. It is not simply the politicians I can't get my head around. I am doubtful of the whole enterprise. I trust no one, least of all myself and my instincts. Apartheid's legacies seem to have woven themselves into the most intimate of spaces. Dysfunction pulses at every streetlight and violence seeps under every door. I am suspicious of everyone. The momentum of freedom has carried me just past a decade but I am

beginning to wonder if it can take me any further. I am out of step; more an exile than I thought.



We scramble and find a full-time nanny. We interview a woman named Pinah. She is from Zimbabwe, like so many of the women who now care for the children of the elite. She is a former schoolteacher. This time Mummy and I appraise her with the eyes of seasoned upper-class women. She is older than Nikki. Stable. No demands. She has a son who is thirteen but we want her to stay with us. She says she has just shipped him home to Bulawayo. She wants him to have a good education but she is fearful for his safety in Hillbrow. We nod and agree. Self-servingly, I don't offer to take him on—to educate him at the school down the road.

We pay her well to massage our guilt. We offer her medical aid. We give her a thirteenth cheque. We pay her overtime far above the minimum wage. We are good people. She seems grateful but now I am wise enough to know that unfairness is built into the system so her gratitude does not change the fact of our complicity.

Unless one of us is prepared to resign from our job and we radically alter our lifestyle—unless we are prepared to refuse any sort of domestic help and do it ourselves—we are consigned to this system and to this feeling. So we learn to live with the guilt and keep a slight emotional distance even as we breathe one another's air, live under the same roof, talk about our favourite soapies, *Scandal* and *Generations*, and eat together once a week.

Congo Road is not what I had hoped, yet what I had hoped was never going to be possible. That sort of fairytale isn't real anywhere, and was certainly not real in the South African neighbourhoods that new blacks like me began to occupy after apartheid.

The children I imagined when I first walked into this house were born, but biology has a different momentum from sociology. The

security I had imagined, the idyllic quiet, the kind of emotional tranquillity that is implicit in the scene I sketched as I stood on the threshold the afternoon we put the offer in—that never materialised. I discovered, over five years in that beautiful haunted house, that nothing in South Africa is safe—especially not your dreams.

And yet the paradox of South Africa is that every morning we rose. In spite of the underlying dread, in spite of the fear, we put on our clothes and we left our children at home. We left them in the hands of black women whose presence in our homes we owed to apartheid. We trusted the women. We abhorred the system. And so, on some level—when we muttered under our breaths about the laundry or the food—it was evident that we abhorred the women too, because they were living, breathing monuments to everything we had left behind when Nelson Mandela put his hand on the Constitution and took his oath of office as the first president of democratic South Africa.

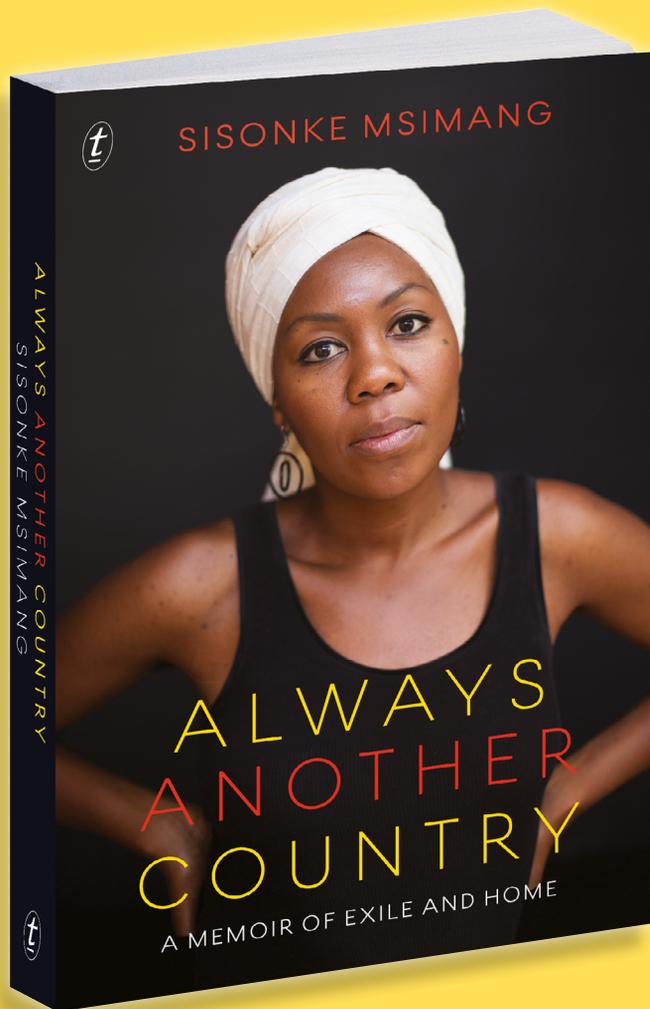
So, like all our friends from exile, and those who had stayed and endured and fought, we lived in this fancy neighbourhood. We lived with the unasked questions and a churning in our guts that was worse on some days than on others. We did this because the whole system was rotten, and we knew that by moving in, and by choosing to buy beautiful old houses in Emmarentia and Sandton and Melrose, the beautiful tree-lined neighbourhoods from which people like us were barred only a decade before, we were killing certain parts of ourselves.

We killed the questions and tried to still the noise that came when we moved into these quiet places where we were meant to find peace and evade nosy neighbours and township dramas. We silenced our own questions and pretended the alienation was simply a passing phase because we wanted to deepen and extend and preserve our new-found privileges.

We told ourselves that this is what our parents had fought for. This was not true, of course. Our parents had fought for equality, but we

were not occupying spaces of equality—we were simply ascending to places higher up on a ladder that we knew provided unfair leverage to a tiny group. We were now part of that group.

This is middle-class South Africa: hoping for the best. Bringing home the bacon. Buying new cars. Planting hedges. Hoping for the best, but creating the worst. We pretend we don't know this, and it is this pretence that is most abhorrent. Because, as James Baldwin says, 'It is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.'



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