

WHITE PAIN



HERE TO STAY. GONE TOMORROW. IN A SERIES OF PIERCING
VIGNETTES FROM LIFE AND WORK IN THE SUBURBS OF
JOHANNESBURG, A FILM-MAKER THROWS INTO RELIEF
THIS CLASSICALLY SOUTH AFRICAN DILEMMA.

CRYING ON THE HARD SHOULDER

STORY AND SELF-PORTRAIT BY LESLEY LAWSON

One year after the election I buy my first house. I choose to stay in Yeoville where I have lived for nine years – the fastest de-racialising suburb in the country. I dig a garden, put down roots. When cautious friends inquire I say: "Whatever happens, I am here for it – here to stay."

NEIGHBOURS FROM HELL - 1

The first summer I am here my across-the-road neighbour, Dr Barry the Furniture Fixer, loses his job and his car is repossessed. He takes to staggering about drunkenly in the road threatening black passers-by with a knife. One day I hear him shouting at the caretaker of the block of flats who is sweeping the driveway and minding his own business: "You useless black people – you can't do anything and you expect us to give you everything. You just come here and I'll fuck you up."

Barry also beats up his wife, and when I try to intervene he threatens to kill me and burn down my house. Finally he shocks his landlady by mincing around in front of her; in the street, stark naked. She tells him to leave.

CRIME AND NO PUNISHMENT

It's a sweltering November night and a friend comes to visit. She is an ex-South African living in London and is back in Johannesburg for the first time in many years. She is on tenterhooks. I say to her: "Oh well, there is crime, to be sure, but it is vastly exaggerated in the media."

The words are barely out of my mouth when we hear loud screaming from the street. My next door neighbour, Barbara, is running about in the road like a lunatic shouting: "My son, my house. Help me please. Oh help me. My son, my house..."

My friend and I rush towards the gate and I hesitate there for a moment, holding her back, to see what is going on. Two sweet young dudes pass the gate. They smile at us and say: "Your neighbours are fighting, you

better go and help."

My first thought is that there has been a family murder. Barbara keeps on with her running in circles and shouting. By now another neighbour has come out in her dressing gown and puts her arms around her. Turns out there has been a hijacking attempt. The cool dudes who passed had put a gun to her head, ripped her gold cross from her neck and relieved her of her car keys. She screamed so loudly they decided to make off before they were apprehended.

In a few minutes there are dozens of us out in the road, in various states of undress, trying to calm Barbara who by now is in the middle of a full-blown hysteria attack. She throws herself down on the grass verge among the dog turds, kicking her legs and screaming blue murder. One of the New Agers sends out a bottle of Rescue Remedy but it does not seem to help. Somebody calls the security company who are so alarmed at Barbara's condition that they come in to call an ambulance.

A polite young man from the ambulance service calls back. He tells me they are short-staffed because all their vehicles are out attending to gunshot wounds. He suggests we take my neighbour for therapy.

The following week I see my little godson painstakingly fixing a coat hanger to the handle bars of his tricycle. When I ask him what he is doing he says, "It's so the baddies won't steal my car."

A NEW AGE OF CRUELTY

The December of 1997 I am at the magistrates court. "You see Lesley," the prosecutor says, "They are meant to be one millimetre for every year of life, so if a child of four has an opening of eight millimetres you know that something is probably wrong."

This summer I am researching a film on child abuse for Channel 4, spending my days engaged in conversation with complete strangers about hymeneal openings. About incestuous rape. About the sexual abuse of children too small to give evidence in court.

One high school I visit has a peer counselling group of over 40 children. Another primary school claims to have 38 cases of child abuse reported in one year. In a parked car outside the school yard, a tiny girl tells me: "Jacob, the boy in my class, he raped me."

I visit Marietjie whose three-year-old son has been raped by the play-school teacher – also a nursery school teacher at the local Dutch Reformed Church. Marietjie has wild hair and wild eyes. She is on the threshold of collapse. She describes the way the abuse has sexualised her boy. She says: "Have you ever seen a child that's penis is hard and thick like a man's, with a big vein on it?"

The child's anus is completely worn out. His own erection terrifies him. Weeks later we meet a little red-haired girl who was at the same crèche as him. The story goes that they were made to have foreplay for the teacher and his friends. When asked what bad things happened she says she doesn't know, she wasn't really there.

MY HEART WAS SORE

I spend time with a group of older girls who have been abused as children. One of the girls in this group has a story that I have been unable to get to the bottom of. She speaks very fast and is largely incoherent. One day I visit Martha at the children's home where she lives. She proudly shows me around the dormitory she shares with six other girls. "Look," she says, "I have my own cupboard, and my own chest of drawers."

Martha leafs through a pile of snapshots of her friends and family. The friends, it turns out, are all from the home or other shelters where she has lived. Her most precious picture is of a little ragged girl in front of a corrugated iron shack – her baby sister.

We settle down into bean bags in the common room and Martha tells me her story. It seems that when she was about eight her mother abandoned her and her sister in this shack in a homeland village. Here they relied on handouts from neighbours. After the mother had run away, the mother's



boyfriend visited the house every Friday to rape Martha, by way of a girlfriend substitute. He tells her he is teaching her to be a proper woman.

As the story unfolds, Martha begins to speak faster. Every second sentence is punctuated with the phrase "my God, my heart was sore." Which is said so quickly it is more of a mannerism than a figure of speech.

In 1996 four armed men come to the house where Martha is staying with her friend and baby sister. They say that her mother owes them R1 500, and Martha must pay up. First they rape the friend and Martha hides her baby sister under the bed. When Martha resists rape they cut her with a knife. Martha shows me the long, fine scars all over her body and legs.

"Then they slept with me the whole night," she says. When Martha reports it to the police they tell her that if she can't identify her attackers they can't help her. She contacts her mother who tells her to grow up. Her mother says that it's not the first time that something like this has happened.

Martha also tells her stepfather, whose response is to beat her up. "I couldn't sit

down. My God, my heart was sore, it was the worst day in my life."

Martha decides to run away with her baby sister. She stops a truck and asks for a lift to Johannesburg, which she thinks is just like the village where she lives. She plans to ask around until she locates her mum. For a year Martha and her sister become street kids and live in a shelter. Eventually they link up with the mother who takes them to stay with an aunt. While they are there, an old lady she doesn't know takes her little sister away, and that's the last she hears of her.

After she finishes her story she says: "The reason I speak so fast is that my story is so bad I don't want to hear it myself."

EVIL EVERYWHERE

As the summer unfolds I begin to see child abuse everywhere. I go to the movies with an old friend and on the way back in the car he says: "I've never spoken about this before, but my whole childhood my father fucked my three sisters. First it was my older sister. Then the younger ones took her place. The first time I was aware of it was one night, when I was 11, we went camping and

PREVIOUS PAGE AND LEFT

The author behind her gates: "I am not sure if the latest batch of intruders has made me especially paranoid but I fear the edit suite in my study is attracting a lot of attention."

I heard them in the other tent making funny noises."

He starts to cry and I know I will never be able to comfort him. "I feel so guilty that I never did anything about it," he says.

Great wrenching sobs come out of this thin body — he is crying as much for the future as for the past. He senses a contagion which implicates him in his dealings with his own little daughter.

DIGGING FOR BODIES

Every night on television we see images from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission — families trying to set their grief at rest with a deeper understanding of the who and the how of apartheid's murders. One family attends the excavation of their daughter who was buried in a shallow grave by her security police murderers. They gaze lovingly at her skeleton, in the red earth — the hollow pelvis which bore so much pain. At another murder site mothers dance over a clearing in the veld where their children were burnt alive. They grovel in the dust which once soaked up the blood of their young. They ululate, as if their voices may be able to lay the spirits to rest.

This child abuse story has brought me to my knees. Though I am certain I was not raped in body, I am re-introduced to a wounded inner child. Great gouts of childhood pain come oozing out of me. I tell myself that if it means that I am squeezing all this stuff out, once and for all, like some giant Freudian toothpaste extravaganza, then it will be worth it. But I fear the analogy to a bottomless pit of lumpy custard is more appropriate. A thin skin will form over this treacherous mush, only to be disturbed again at a later date.

WHITE PAIN

I suppose those of us who know how to cry are the lucky ones. Others act out their pain and rage in brutal revenge on those weaker than themselves.

It seems that there is no soft place to lie down any more – no cotton-wool dreams of a better future. We may think we are sleeping between freshly laundered sheets, but the mattress hasn't been turned for three hundred years and there's a viper's nest beneath.

THE END OF HISTORY

Wits Sociology professor, Eddie Webster, comes by to return a set of my photographs which he has been using in lectures with his first year students. One image is of a protest march in 1988, when FW de Klerk, as education minister, was threatening to introduce legislation which would curb academic freedom. Initially the students are overcome with mirth because at the centre of the frame there is a deputation from the Wits Lesbian and Gay Movement. When he asks them for other observations they say:

"The most interesting thing about this photograph is that it shows a time when black and white students did things together."

The next week I am at a party with Wits historian Phil Bonner who says that every time he shows the (very excellent) Soweto History television series he produced, the students walk out. He thinks that students find the past so humiliating and so oppressive that they recoil from engaging with it.

NEIGHBOURS FROM HELL - 2

I am surrounded by neighbours from rowdy cultures – Soweto on the one side and Tuscany on the other. One day when Tuscany is playing his carpentry music on the car stereo in his driveway I lean over the wall and yell: "When you do that my whole house shakes!" He looks bemused and for a few days desists from this practice.

The neighbours on the other side have loud parties all night, or else they are out at the jols, which is worse because they come home at four in the morning and party in the

street. When another neighbour asks them to tone it down they say: "Go back to Sandton where you belong."

One week they garage a car with a faulty alarm which goes off for ten minutes in every hour. At one am, on the third night of this, several of us get up simultaneously and confront them. Soweto says she is just so fed up with all this victimisation of black people in the new South Africa. While I take her and her brother on a tour of Yeoville to find the owner, another neighbour cannibalises the battery cables and the noise stops. A few months later they are evicted after the males of the household have a gun fight in the street.

FEAR AND LOATHING ON THE AIDS TRAIL

It is November 1998 and I am making a film on HIV/AIDS for e-tv. I concentrate on the high levels of death and illness which already dominate rural and urban areas to the south. Of course this means unspeakable horror in the research phase.

I spend a while with two hospice programmes in KwaZulu-Natal province, where the epidemic is currently running at 33% of all ante-natal attendees. In a small area outside Durban they are seeing more than 100 people in various stages of dying (presenting illness commonly TB). There are two really devastating aspects to this – one is that it is all so secret that even the primary caregiver, usually the mother, is not told of the underlying HIV; the other is the devastating degree of poverty into which people are thrust when the breadwinner becomes ill.

We are not talking clean sheets in a hospital bed here, it's home-based care of the most rudimentary sort. The hospice programmes themselves are seriously under-funded, dying people not being a concern of the New South African Health system which has prioritised primary health care facilities in the tried and true third world health reform model. The Durban programme gets no government money and relies totally on the goodness of unemployed women in the affected communi-

ties. They have devised a monitoring system which can be easily used by unskilled or illiterate people. The volunteers are required to ascribe symbols to different activities which the patient may or may not be able to perform eg. washing, sitting on a chair, going to the shops etc. A circle means yebo, ngaphandle kosizo (yes, can do unaided) a square means yebo ngosizo (can do with help) and a triangle means cha (no can do.) So all the volunteer has to report is 'all triangles in that neighbourhood, they need more help'.

As the ambulance service is virtually non-existent (if there is a van and staff available they mostly refuse to go into these areas which are racked by crime and violence) the hospice programme lends the family a wheelchair which the able-bodied family member (usually a child or granny) uses to push their dying one to the clinic which may be several miles away, up treacherous muddy hills and pitted roads.

One visit sums up all the horrors: A young woman is lying on a sagging sofa in a derelict shack. Her head is so big in relation to her emaciated body that she seems deformed. When I talk about the film, the volunteer quickly shuts me up, and it becomes clear that this girl had not told her mother she is HIV positive. During the time I am there, the young dying daughter (25 years with three kids) lifts her head up twice to tell me that she is starving. She is on TE medication – nine tablets to be taken before meals – and as she points out the medication could work if there were some meals to go with it.

In another home the daughter (20, two kids) has dementia, open sores and TB/starvation. She is being looked after by her elderly mother who tells me: "It's so painful I brought her up from babyhood once and now I have to do it all over again."

She half-believes that nurturing kindness will cure the girl. The hospice worker tells me that she is trying to pluck up the courage to disabuse the mum of this notion, but hasn't

got round to it. I am sure that the old woman knows. Their home is a single room in what was once a middle class bungalow, and is now a boarding house of sorts, with neither electricity nor running water. As the years have worn away layers of paint and plaster, the exterior has become pitted and grey, looking more like ancient ruins than a dwelling. The first time I go there I am unprepared.

In the bright, sewage-stained sunlight, sits a crowd of men drinking and laughing. The girl, in a yellow overall four sizes too big, comes out to greet us. She is holding a piece of twisted metal which she uses to peer through, as if it's a camera. She takes us by the hands into her family's room which is furnished with a bed, a dresser and one wardrobe. On the dresser, carefully arranged in order of colour and height, are rows of faded plastic cups, bowls and plates. The melamine has long since given way, and the surface is regurgitating lumps of chipboard. I find myself sitting on a wooden bench next to the wardrobe, with a pile of clothes at face height. The stench in the room is of unwashed garments, nocturnal diarrhoea, suppurating sores, morning vomits. Apart from a bottle of cooking oil and a few bread crumbs next to the paraffin stove, there is no sign of food.

When I get home I am ragged. One night I dream that British food writer Nigel Slater is teaching me how to ice a Christmas cake and the sun goes out.

INTRUDERS

One evening the edit ends early and my neighbour comes over for tea. As we are sitting in the living-room we hear a crash from the study. I investigate and find nothing. "Must be a poltergeist I say."

My neighbour comes behind me and opens the front door. She gasps in fright and slams it shut when she sees a strange man there. It is Michael, the man with the limp, who is always in our street, aggressively begging for money. A few weeks back he had

come while I was on the phone and tried to push through the door while I was talking. Michael says he is selling books and brings out a novel from a deep pocket in his jacket. I tell him, no thanks. I tell him to go.

A few moments later I realise my cell phone is missing. I run out to look for him but he has disappeared. My neighbour has the presence of mind to call the number and promise him 50 bucks to return the phone, which he agrees to do later. When he doesn't come she calls again and he says: "Will you please stop phoning me, I am busy."

Two nights later I am awoken by a rustling which precedes the arm pulling back the curtain of my bedroom. A stranger's face looks in at me. Despite my terror, I disdain the panic button and leap out of bed to confront him. "What-the-fuck are you doing. Get the hell off my property!" I shout. He looks affronted.

"But you can see that the gate was unlocked," he says, "I was just knocking to see if anyone was at home." Our faces are half a metre apart through the whirligigs of the burglar bars. "You were not knocking. Get away from here immediately," I scream.

He shrugs and slopes off into the night. When I go out to make sure he is not still lurking, I see that he has lined up a row of seedlings next to the window which he was obviously planning to steal – pennyroyal, beetroot, basil and spinach.

This is no place for a single woman of advancing years. Hayi Khona.

COLLYWOBBLES

Every few hours someone rings on the bell asking for food, money or old clothing. I am not sure if the latest batch of intruders has made me especially paranoid, but I fear that the edit suite stationed in my study, is attracting a lot of attention. I am surly and un-giving. There is one man, however, who gets my interest by calling out: "Hi there I was just passing and I thought you might be able to help me." I go out to the gate (by now, always locked) and peer at him through the

slats. "My wife and I are HIV positive and are on homeopathic medication which is helpful, but very expensive" he says, and starts hauling out these little slips of crumpled paper – a letter of diagnosis from the hospital, his ID book; an affidavit swearing that the man in the ID book and the diagnosis paper are one and the same.

I give the man everything in my purse, which fortunately for me is only R40.

I go back into the house holding onto myself. My editor who has taken this opportunity to have a breather in the back garden comes in, fresh-faced, asking: "Is it easy to grow rosemary?"

He stops short when he sees me sobbing. A few hours later I collapse with such acute stomach pain that my editor has to rush me to the doctor for an intravenous injection.

HARD SHOULDER

It is a blissful summer of steamy days and midnight storms. A gardener's delight. The fragrance of mountain herbs wafts in through my open windows. There are sparrows surfing in the sweet alyssum and brightly patterned barbets burbling, like running water in the grape vine.

I think a lot. I realise that the kindest thing I can do is convince myself that I was wrong, that it is OK to be wrong, and to put aside thirty years of dreams of a better life... of belief in the redeeming goodness of ordinary people. I must get up and go of my own accord, else I'll be thrown from the moving car. Perhaps I'll even wind up crying on the hard shoulder, with nothing to show for my life but head injuries.

In my heart of hearts I know I have been ready to leave for ages. The reason for the delay is the packing. I have to muster up some courage because there are a few particularly heavy bags which I want to leave behind.

In my new dreams I am footloose and fancy free. I am a middle-aged hitch-hiker, belly-dancing in a field of cosmos 'til the cows come home. ▲