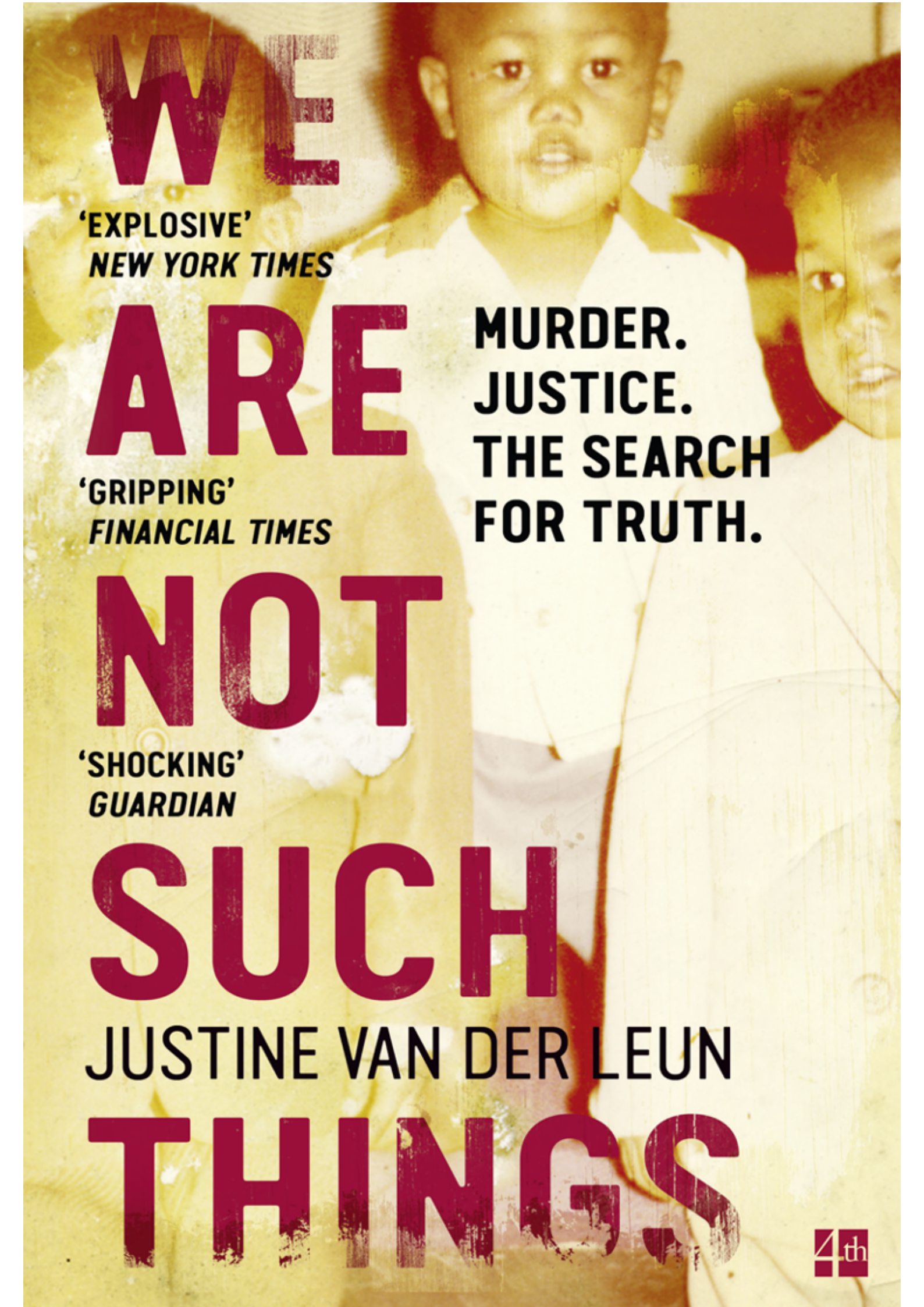




WE

'EXPLOSIVE'
NEW YORK TIMES

ARE

'GRIPPING'
FINANCIAL TIMES

**MURDER.
JUSTICE.
THE SEARCH
FOR TRUTH.**

NOT

'SHOCKING'
GUARDIAN

SUCH

JUSTINE VAN DER LEUN

THINGS

Литагент HarperCollins

**We Are Not Such Things: A Murder
in a South African Township and the
Search for Truth and Reconciliation**

«HarperCollins»

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**We Are Not Such Things: A Murder in a South African Township
and the Search for Truth and Reconciliation / Л. HarperCollins —
«HarperCollins»,**

A 'MAKING A MURDERER' set in South Africa - a gripping true-crime story of murder and the justice system in the shadow of apartheid. In 1993, in the final, fiery days of apartheid, a 26-year-old white American activist called Amy Biehl was murdered by a group of young black men in a township near Cape Town. Four men were tried and convicted of the murder and sentenced to eighteen years in prison. A few years later they had been freed. Two of the men were subsequently employed by Amy's parents to work at a charity set up in her memory. The men grew close to the Biehls. They called them 'Grandmother' and 'Grandfather'. Justine van der Leun, an American writer living in South Africa, set out to tell this twenty-year story, but as she delved into the case, the prevailing narrative started to unravel. Why didn't the eyewitness reports agree on who killed Amy Biehl? Were the men convicted of the crime actually responsible? And could it be that another violent crime committed on the same day, in the very same area, was connected to the murder of Amy Biehl? *We Are Not Such Things* is the result of Justine van der Leun's four years investigating this strange, knotted tale of injustice, hatred, forgiveness and reconciliation. It is a gripping journey through the bizarre twists and turns of this case and its aftermath – and a lucid, eye-opening account of life today in a society still fractured and haunted by apartheid.

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We Are Not Such Things

Murder. Justice.
The Search for Truth.

Justine van der Leun
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Copyright

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Justine van der Leun asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

Map by Jeffrey L. Ward

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Praise for *We Are Not Such Things*:

‘A book I kept returning to. It’s not so much the story of the idealistic US activist Amy Biehl’s murder in the South African township of Gugulethu but about what happened next: the lies and self-delusion of both perpetrators and family and the inevitably manipulative ends to which her death was put in a nation still choking on apartheid’s legacy. Van der Leun has a compassionate but admirably clear eye’

MICHELA WRONG, *Spectator* Books of the Year

‘Unforgettable. A gripping narrative that examines the messiness of truth, the illusory nature of reconciliation, the all too often false promise of justice’

Boston Globe

‘Where the book is gripping, explosive even, is in the kind of obsessive forensic investigation that is the legacy of highbrow sleuths from Truman Capote to Janet Malcolm ... Van der Leun can write superbly, and among Easy’s people in Gugulethu, she crafts a close sense of place that rivals the work of Katherine Boo’

New York Times

‘Extraordinary. A dense and nuanced portrait of a country whose confounding, convoluted past is never quite history’

Entertainment Weekly

‘Moving ... necessary ... A story of frustrated expectations, broken dreams, endemic greed and corruption, but also indomitable human spirit’

Minneapolis Star Tribune

‘Displays exquisite insights into the inner lives of those involved, the erasure of shameful histories, and the stresses of absolution without accountability’

New Yorker

‘A murder story told with the dramatic tension of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* and the precision of the very best nonfiction reporting. Van der Leun takes her readers on hair-raising excursions into the mazes of backyard shacks where Biehl’s killers were raised and into the often-absurd world of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Each page bursts with fresh insights into the contradictions of modern-day South Africa as well as the elusiveness of finding the absolute truth’

BARBARA DEMICK, author of *Nothing to Envy*

‘Suspenseful and engrossing. Van der Leun shows how a powerful desire for reconciliation can in fact obscure the truth, a truth we need in order to establish real equity and the justice that all people deserve’

PIPER KERMAN, author of *Orange is the New Black*

‘A fascinating, clear-eyed journey into the disheartening political reality of contemporary South Africa. In her pursuit of the facts behind a decades-old murder, she shatters convenient narratives about the end of apartheid and the nature of justice, and proceeds on a headlong chase for deeper truths, even those that recede the closer she gets to them’

JILL LEOVY, author of *Ghettoside*

‘A troubling, deeply felt piece of work. Van der Leun’s excellent reportage reveals that things are not what they seem in South Africa. The book is proof that apartheid has left behind a league of ghosts, Amy Biehl among them, and that the South Africa that Nelson Mandela envisioned remains a distant dream’

JAMES MCBRIDE, author of *Kill 'Em and Leave*

‘What an achievement! This unsparing but compassionate work will enlighten and shake its readers’

NORMAN RUSH, author of *Mating*

‘This is not just fine journalism but astonishing storytelling. Justine van der Leun brings to the page a rare combination of muscular reporting, limitless curiosity, soulful vision, courage and tenderness. Through her gifts, you will feel as if you have travelled deep into a country you only thought you knew’

JEFF HOBBS, author of *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace*

Dedication

For Samuel David Choritz

STATE LAWYER: You see what I am going to suggest to you, Mr. Nofemela, is that the attack and brutal murder of Amy Biehl could not have been done with a political objective. It was wanton brutality, like a pack of sharks smelling blood. Isn't that the truth?

EASY NOFEMELA: No, that's not true, that's not true. We are not such things.

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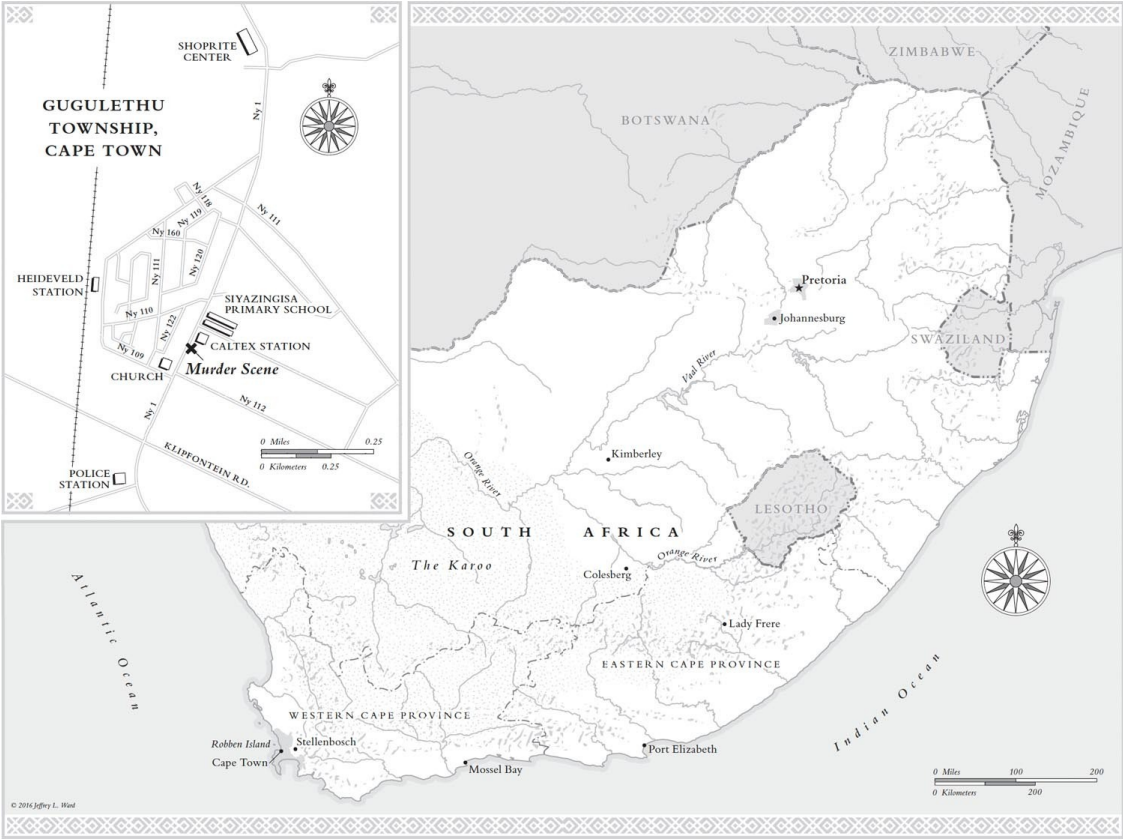
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Map



1.

Some stories are true that never happened.

—ELIE WIESEL

The journalists and documentarians and small-time film producers filed out of the van and toward St. Columba Anglican Church, a gray-brick building on the corner of NY1 and NY109 in Gugulethu, a township eleven miles outside Cape Town city center. Easy and I stayed behind, he in the driver's seat and me on the passenger's side. Easy was a short, compact man with butterscotch skin and a large, round, clean-shaven head. At forty-two, he had this weird ability to shape-shift. Did he look like a hardened old gangster? Yes, some days. Did he look like an adorable, harmless child? Yes, some days. In one of the photos I've snapped of him over the years, he is menacing, crouching on the ground with a cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, his band of brothers behind him, one of them holding up a disembodied sheep's head. But in the next, he's curled on a small stool, cradling his infant son and smiling as his ten-year-old daughter drapes herself over his shoulder.

Easy laughed generously, from the belly, and moved in quick spurts. His features were framed by a constellation of small dark scars: from a knife fight, a stick fight, an adolescent bout with acne, that time he crashed a van into a horse in the middle of the night and then fled, that time the taxi he was riding in collided with a hatchback, and a recent incident involving a scorned ex-girlfriend with long nails and a vendetta. His arms were dotted with fading ballpoint-pen tattoos—one pledging devotion to a long-defunct street gang, one to a prominent prison gang, and one to an old flame named Pinky. The first one had become infected immediately, when he was fifteen, and his mom had spent months tending to it. After that, for a few years at least, Easy felt like it made him look particularly tough.

I liked Easy very much. I won't pretend otherwise. But then again: precisely twenty years before our meeting in the van, on August 25, 1993, and approximately fifteen yards away, Easy had been part of a mob that had hunted down a young white American woman. If you plucked her out of that moment in history and slotted me in, my fate would have likely been the same. Easy chased her through the streets, chanting the slogan "One settler, one bullet," and hurled jagged bricks at her. He stabbed at her as she begged for her life. She died, bleeding from her head and her chest, on the pavement just across the road.

At least this is the crime Easy repeatedly claimed to have committed. He was convicted of her murder, and sentenced to eighteen years in jail. He'd done it, he publicly stated, because "during that time my spirit just says I must kill the white." The dead woman was named Amy Biehl, and she was twenty-six years old.

Once we finished our conversation, Easy and I hopped out of the van. He locked the door and patted the hood. The vehicle was a shiny silver donation from a local auto dealership that said across the side in bold letters: THE AMY BIEHL FOUNDATION.

We walked toward the church together, but as I stepped toward the door, Easy lingered in the winter sunshine. "I'm coming now," he said. This was South Africanese for "I'll be right back."

I went on without him. A sorry-eyed man in an ill-fitting suit motioned me into a pew. I slid in and scanned the room, its high ceilings, its tall burning votives. On a portrait nailed high above on the wall, a white Jesus, as lithe and glossy as a Hollywood star, reclined among a small herd of angelic lambs. Behind the pulpit hung an enormous cross.

I could see Amy Biehl's mother, Linda, sitting several rows ahead, her sharp platinum bob distinct in a dark sea of cornrows, weaves, wraps, curls, and towering church hats. Linda was the sort of woman who swept into town, and then swept into rooms, and then swept around rooms, her lipstick and eyeliner painted in broad, unbroken lines. She was nearly seventy. She liked to tell stories to rapt audiences. She always set her jaw and held her head high, and when I had first met her, just over

a year earlier, I had found her to be impossibly composed. But with time, I came to notice that her body betrayed her attempts at imperturbable dignity: her shoulders slumped forward and she seemed, often, to be fighting against a great weight that threatened to drag her down.

Her friends, a pair of white American filmmakers, flanked her in the pew. She held in her arms a three-year-old black girl, hair cropped close to the head, dressed all in purple. The father of the girl was a man named Ntobeko Peni. According to all available reports, court records, and his own voluntary confession, Ntobeko had joined Easy and two other men in the attack on Amy. Back then, Ntobeko was a teenager and Easy and the other men were in their early twenties.

South Africa was in the final, fiery days of apartheid, when the entire country seemed poised for civil war. The young men, in the stories they would later repeat to various officials and commissions and journalists, had just left a political rally for a fringe militant party called the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania, or the PAC. Ntobeko and Easy were among around one hundred young people marching down NY1, the street where the church still sits. After forty-five years of state-sanctioned racial segregation, which saw black South Africans stripped of basic human rights and contained in slums, Nelson Mandela was poised to be the first black president of the country. Apartheid was on its way to being dismantled.

Amy, a Fulbright scholar at a Cape Town university, had spent nearly a year researching the rights and roles of disadvantaged women and children of color in this transitioning new democracy. That day, she had agreed to give two black students a lift home to the townships. As she drove by, the marchers spotted her, her long dirty-blond hair a bull's-eye. The crowd, knowing nothing about her, decided she looked very much like the oppressor. Her death, they claimed to believe, would further their cause to bring African land back to indigenous Africans: *One settler, one bullet*. Or maybe they were just looking for revenge on a pretty afternoon. They pulled Amy from her car, chased her down the road, and stoned and stabbed her to death on a little patch of grass in front of a gas station.

Four men—Easy and Ntobeko among them—were tried and convicted of Amy's murder and were sentenced to eighteen years in prison. But in 1997, they applied for amnesty at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, South Africa's experiment in restorative justice. Chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the commission offered release and a clean slate to those who, upon taking responsibility, fully and honestly, for their apartheid-era crimes, could prove that their misdeeds were politically motivated.

In 1993, Linda, a stay-at-home mom turned clothing saleswoman, and her husband, Peter, a businessman, lived in a wealthy California coastal suburb. They had never before set foot on the African continent, but soon after Amy's death they flew to Cape Town. They immersed themselves in the rapidly changing country. They educated themselves on its complex political situation. They threw themselves into social welfare programs and spent time with the political elite of the African National Congress, Nelson Mandela's party and the party Amy had admired.

"We want to carry on where our daughter left off," Peter told a TV reporter. "We want to assist at the grassroots level anyone who's working for human rights and women's rights in particular. We want to be just as active as she was."

The ANC, for its part, took the Biehls into their fold. Amy had been a "comrade," the ANC announced. Moreover, she had been a martyr for their cause: liberty for all, racial harmony, and equality. Also, it looked good to have these two appealing, well-off Americans stand up for the ANC. Eventually Linda and Peter became friendly with a bunch of the liberation-era luminaries: Mandela himself; Archbishop Tutu; deputy president and soon-to-be-president Thabo Mbeki; and Ahmed Kathrada, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment with Mandela in 1964.

In 1997, when the men convicted of killing Amy sat before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Biehls, too, attended. They decided that Amy, who often wrote of the importance of reconciliation and moving forward in post-apartheid South Africa, would have wanted them to respect the processes of this new democracy. And so, unlike many families of victims, the Biehls did

not oppose amnesty for Amy's killers, and the men were released from prison in 1998, after serving between three and five years.

A University of California at Berkeley anthropologist named Nancy Scheper-Hughes—who now sat near Linda in a pew in St. Columba Church—had been working in South Africa in 1993. She had written about the crime and the trial in several academic papers. In the ensuing years, when Nancy was not tracking an international ring of organ traffickers or looking into infant mortality rates in the Brazilian favelas, she was investigating violence in post-apartheid South Africa. She had grown especially intrigued by Easy and Ntobeko, and in August 1999 she hired a guide to take her to Gugulethu, where the men were staying after their release from prison. Nancy interviewed them, and they expressed to her an admiration for Peter Biehl and the desire to meet him in person, and to apologize face-to-face.

"I thought that there was one thing that could possibly make me better," Ntobeko confessed to Nancy. "I wanted to tell Mr. Biehl that I did not take the death of his daughter lightly. That this thing has weighed heavily on me. And I wanted him to know that he is a hero father to me. If I could just get Peter Biehl to listen to me and to forgive me to my face—why that would be as good as bread."

Nancy called Peter, who was staying at a Cape Town hotel at the time, and arranged for such a meeting.

"He probably thought I was a real buttinski," she recalled.

Peter, Nancy, and Nancy's guide proceeded to drive to Gugulethu for what began, Nancy told me, as a "tense meeting, on a miserable, rainy day." She stood to the side, taking copious notes and snapping photos, as a sullen, skinny Ntobeko and a sullen, skinny Easy ushered Peter into a shack they had claimed as their "clubhouse," a drafty hovel with a couple of small chairs and a love seat. The three spoke to each other, gruffly at first, but soon they softened. Easy served Peter tea. Easy and Ntobeko explained to Peter that they were starting a youth group; the bunch had already climbed Table Mountain together and they'd designed T-shirts. They nicknamed Nancy "the bridge" for her role in connecting the two worlds. They asked to meet Linda, who was in America, where her youngest daughter, Molly, had just given birth to a baby boy. Soon thereafter, Linda arrived in Cape Town and accompanied Peter to Gugulethu. Ntobeko and Easy were waiting for her. Easy showed her a photograph of his six brothers. Linda in turn showed him a photograph of her new grandson.

"Makhulu," Easy said.

"What does that mean?"

"Grandmother."

From then on, Easy and Ntobeko addressed Linda and Peter as Makhulu and Tatomkhulu, respectively: Grandmother and Grandfather in the Xhosa language, honorifics used to express reverence. Linda and Peter spent a lazy Sunday evening as guests of honor at the official launch of Easy and Ntobeko's youth club; mostly it involved sitting outside and watching kids dance and give speeches. Next, the Biehls invited the men to dinner.

"Easy's mother said we would be given such things," Ntobeko whispered when a waiter presented them menus a few days later. Until then, the young men's dining out experience had been limited to a few trips to a takeaway joint.

Easy shoveled in steak and a milkshake, leaving his vegetables pushed to the side of his plate, while Ntobeko, who had a more adventurous culinary spirit, picked at a towering pile of nachos and then watched in wonder as the remainder was gathered into a package called a "doggie bag." The four ambled over the wide, sanded docks by the ocean and into the mall. During apartheid, the men had had limited access to white-designated areas, the sorts of places that boasted ritzy shops and restaurants. When apartheid fell, they were in prison. Since they'd left prison, they hadn't had a penny to their names. The Biehls bought four tickets to an IMAX film about water, and then the group wandered around the adjacent BMW dealership, admiring the shiny cars until showtime. After that, the Biehls bought four tickets to *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*. Linda fell asleep during

the movie. It was too late for the men to catch a taxi, so the Biehls drove into the township at night and deposited the men at their homes.

The next morning, Easy called Linda at her hotel to inform her that, in a rare turn of events, a small tornado had swept through the township in the early morning hours, flattening shacks. He was checking to see that the Biehls had gotten back safely. He also wished to tell the Biehls that his family was furious at him, since Ntobeko had returned home with leftover nachos to share, while Easy had returned empty-handed. The legend of the doggie bag had then been disseminated through the families and has endured. Years later, while dining with Easy and Ntobeko and their relatives, Linda once excused herself to go to the restroom; when she returned, her meal, which she had not finished, was boxed up and sitting in front of one of the guests.

The Biehls developed a warm relationship with Easy and Ntobeko, which they maintained felt entirely natural. They took them to dozens of restaurants, taught them how to tip, introduced them to wine. Soon, they employed the two men to work at the foundation they had established in Amy's name.

The Amy Biehl Foundation, initially funded largely by the American government, was supposed to work to prevent violence, create jobs, develop the area, provide food, and offer recreation opportunities within Cape Town's townships. But these days, the foundation focused on after-school classes for local kids. The staff taught dance and reading and music, and handed out jam sandwiches.

Over time, Ntobeko rose in the ranks at the foundation. Without a high school degree, he began as a security guard on a bakery truck, but by 2013, Ntobeko was an office manager who lorded over the employees (most of them black), despairing at their lack of ambition, reading *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and idolizing Henry Ford. His old socialist days were long gone, and he was a capitalist now. He even had a couple of sidelines: school transport, wholesale chicken distribution, soft-serve ice cream, and a little wash-and-fold laundromat run from his garage. Easy, meanwhile, had risen from security guard to sports coordinator, and then had been dubbed unreliable and demoted to driver, a position he had accepted with resignation and relief.

The two men had grown up together. Ntobeko was a friend of Easy's younger brother and had spent many nights at the Nofemela house. They had grown closer in prison and, bonded by the experience, spent a great deal of time together upon their release. But these days, with Ntobeko acting as Easy's boss, the two only saw each other at work.

"We're just colleagues, not friends," Easy said. "If a person choose his own direction, I don't blame him."

The men visited the Biehls in America, and were invited to speak at conferences across the country. They were disappointed that they did not meet many of "the Black Americans," whom Easy expected—as per a lifetime of watching TV shows and movies, particularly *Big Momma's House*, starring the "great actor and great guy" Martin Lawrence—to say things like, "Yeah, mah maaannn, wussup, mah maaannn!" and "Mudderfucker!" Easy and Ntobeko preferred the New Jersey suburbs to the towering New York buildings, and once looked upon a swath of untamed Massachusetts land and noted that they could build an African village there. They were pleased to stay near a Manhattan police station, which they referred to as "NYPD Blue" and had their snapshots taken with mustachioed cops. Easy discovered that his favorite cuisine was the American buffet, which allowed a person to eat as much meat as desired for no additional fee. The men were impressed by hotels, and in particular, hotel bathrooms, which were the polar opposite of Gugulethu outhouses. During one trip, they took a series of photographs of each other dressed in color-coordinated b-boy outfits, lounging on the marble sink and striking a pose by the glass-encased shower. Easy kept these pictures, along with several stand-alone portraits of toilets and bathtubs, in a photo album.

After Peter died of aggressive colon cancer at age fifty-nine in 2002, Ntobeko and Easy helped arrange a Gugulethu memorial service in his honor. The two marched Linda around the township, one man on each arm, trailed by a crowd of mourners. As they had done before Peter's death, the men

continued to accompany Linda to paid engagements in Europe and the United States, where their relationship was held up as an example of the power of forgiveness, reconciliation, and redemption.

At least—with the exception of some blogs run by disapproving white-power enthusiasts who, upon relating Amy's story, gleefully claimed, "liberalism can get you killed!"—that was how the story had always gone, repeated ad infinitum in over a thousand national and international newspaper and magazine articles, in award-winning documentaries, on talk shows, on radio shows, on TV shows. And why wouldn't it? Its stars played their parts, and confirmed the arc and breadth of the distinct narrative: black South Africans, loving by nature but distorted into rampage by apartheid, who had been reformed and redeemed through the grace of an inspirational if puzzling pair of good-looking white Americans.

Now it was the twentieth anniversary of Amy's death. Press interest had waned years ago. Before, the top journalists at major international papers had covered the ongoing story, but now the only foreign press was a reporter from Linda's hometown paper, *The Orange County Register*, jotting down notes. During this trip, Linda had one radio interview, which was in turn picked up by a single website. The press had largely forgotten about Amy and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and were busy looking into the more immediate potty protests, during which angry township residents who wanted to relieve themselves in flush toilets instead of the communal sludge buckets they currently employed, had taken to throwing human feces at the mayor's vehicle and dumping the contents of their latrines near Parliament. CAPE TOWN POO WARS, the BBC headline shouted.

Regardless, the people in St. Columba's church that day were focusing on Amy's too-brief life. The foundation loyalists, women who had known and worked for Linda for fifteen years, snuck into the church late, one with her hair tied into knots so tight that her scalp was pulled and red, one intently applying lip gloss with a wand. Ntobeko's wife, wearing a pale gray skirt and top with her hair in ringlets, and their two older daughters in freshly pressed dresses, sat to the back. Ntobeko himself was not there. A haze of incense settled near the ceiling; I could feel the perfume spreading through my lungs.

"Jesus was a teacher, Jesus was a rector, Jesus was everything!" a lady preacher in colorful patterned Xhosa garb began.

"Yes!" said the congregants. They were mostly women, ranging in age from thirty to ninety, in African-print dresses, cardigans, shawls, blazers. A minority of men and children were scattered few and far between.

"Whom do I trust?" the preacher asked rhetorically. "Jesus!"

"Mmmm hmmm," the ladies said.

The preacher launched into Xhosa, then reverted to English. She introduced Linda as "Amy Biehl's mother."

"Hiiii," the ladies said in unison. In these parts, for the older generation, the name Amy Biehl required no explanation.

The preacher said she'd organized a speaker on the occasion of American guests but the speaker had disappointed her by bailing, so she herself would be speaking today. Don't we all know about disappointment? Everyone nodded vigorously.

"Amy was a hero," the preacher said uncertainly. She was winging it. "That was the plan of God. That she must die the way she did." The preacher turned to Linda. "Thank you for having heart to show peace and love."

"Amen," the ladies said solemnly. Linda bowed her head slightly.

A male preacher, dressed in a heavy robe, took over.

"You are here for a reason, Amy was here for a reason," he said to Linda. "We wish you a good day and we will always remember you in our prayers."

"Amen," said the ladies.

I looked around for Easy, then recalled that he was allergic to churches, and so probably would not make an appearance after all. Then again, he sometimes, without great enthusiasm, talked about how Jesus died for his sins, which usually signaled that his evangelical uncle had succeeded in dragging him to a service. So perhaps Easy was, more accurately, allergic not to churches but to the annual memorials to Amy that were held in churches. A year earlier, to the day, at a Catholic church nearby, I had also looked up from the service to find Easy missing. I'd slipped out of the pew and found him pacing nervously on the lawn. He took me into a back room and showed me a bare wall, where local kids used to watch projector movies; he was a sentimentalist, and he remembered, with characteristic nostalgia, not having the five-cent admission fee and sneaking in through a bathroom window.

Now, as the women sang hymns, I went outside to look for Easy, but he was gone, and he had taken the van. I stood in the sunlight, trying to get warm. August is chilly in Cape Town, winter in the Southern Hemisphere. A gray-haired white lady was cutting hearts out of fabric on a bench nearby, assisted by a pretty black teenage girl who called her Grandma. They offered me a heart and a safety pin decorated with colorful beads.

"They symbolize love over violence," the girl explained as I stuck the pin to my sweater.

Some months earlier, the country had been in an uproar about Anene Booysen, a plain-looking brown-skinned seventeen-year-old from a poor Western Cape town who was gang-raped and disemboweled on an abandoned construction site. An even more newsworthy victim, and one who would captivate the nation's attention for years to come, was Reeva Steenkamp, the radiant blond thirty-year-old model and reality TV star shot to death through a bathroom door by her boyfriend, the Olympian and double-amputee Oscar Pistorius. These fabric hearts, the lady said, honored Anene and Reeva and Amy, too, and all the thousands of women injured, murdered, and violated by men each year.

I wandered down NY1 to Amy's memorial statue, by the Caltex gas station and garage where she was killed. From across the street, I could see the dry grass, the old cars piled up for repair, the low stone wall that had long ago replaced the white fence that Amy had leaned on during the attack. The memorial statue was a slick gray marble cross erected in 2010 by the Fulbright Foundation, unveiled to vague fanfare by the U.S. ambassador at the time. On the base of the memorial, carved into stone in elegant capitals, were the words:

AMY BIEHL

26 APRIL 1967 - 25 AUGUST 1993

KILLED IN AN ACT OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE.

AMY WAS A FULBRIGHT SCHOLAR AND TIRELESS HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST.

A disheveled old man usually spent his days leaning against the cross, sleeping rough with his three dogs, but the man had been temporarily relocated to a nearby field. I spotted Ntobeko standing on the pavement above, by the gas pumps. His childhood nickname was Blacks, for he was so dark-skinned that from afar his features were hard to make out. Up close, he was a rotund, somber-looking man in his late thirties, with a narrow face and a weak chin. His head was shaved and rubbed with lotion. His small, glistening eyes were intelligent and suspicious, his nose long and Roman. He was neither tall nor short, and he wore his black Amy Biehl Foundation logo polo shirt stretched tight over his expansive belly.

Ntobeko used to be the scrawniest kid, a pencil neck sticking out of an oversized T-shirt, often borrowed. Now he owned a home, the chicken wholesale business, and two minivans that he used to transport upwardly mobile township children to schools in the city or the suburbs. He was married to his childhood sweetheart and had three daughters. He was a manager, which in Gugulethu held a grand allure—no longer was he merely bossed around, no, finally he got to do the bossing. Ntobeko ate meat nearly every day. His old friends to whom he no longer spoke remembered that he had been a naughty kid who ran around the streets and lived in a tiny house full of extended family. He would miss his household curfew and supper, and find himself locked out for the night. "He was a wild boy

who slept in the trees,” one such friend once told me. Ntobeko saw me from across the road and, as always, averted his gaze.

Ntobeko was helping two other foundation staffers arrange a group of children before two marimbas. Marimbas are wooden xylophone-like instruments that originated in Africa and were introduced by sixteenth-century slaves to Latin America, where they were redesigned and spread around the world. A few kids were expertly hitting the bars with mallets, the chimes whipped up into the wind. A chorus swayed behind them, biding their time, singing halfheartedly. I turned back and went to wait outside the church.

Soon, the doors opened and Linda followed the stream of churchgoers. She wore a black pleated skirt, just above the knee, a black top, black pumps, a coral blazer, and a silk coral scarf. Her hair was, as always, perfect: short, angular, gleaming white-blond, and stick-straight.

A ragtag group of people gathered around her, comprised of a couple of academics Amy had known when she studied in Cape Town; the ambulance driver who had tried unsuccessfully to treat Amy as she died; the fabric-heart-making lady and girl; the reporter for Linda’s hometown paper and the photographer who accompanied her; some Los Angeles-based college graduates making a short film starring black South Africans whose hope against all odds would stun and inspire any audience; several people involved in some form of media; and Nancy Scheper-Hughes, the anthropologist who had introduced Easy and Ntobeko to the Biehls.

Nancy was an elfin sixty-something woman with a pert nose and short gray hair; she radiated a nervous intellectual energy. She was a woman molded by the 1960s free love movement, who tended toward all views radically left-wing and, “being an old Wobbly socialist,” actually celebrated Labor Day. Nancy had been working at the University of Cape Town when Amy was killed, though she’d left the country soon after. Back then, Nancy had joined a band of furious women of all different races and marched the streets of Gugulethu in protest, waving placards demanding that the brutality cease. Now Nancy and her husband had flown out from California, carrying the old cardboard signs from that 1993 peace march, which Nancy had saved for all these years and handed out to anyone who wanted one. Nancy was the director of the Program of Medical Anthropology at UC Berkeley, and had published three books significant in her field, but she appeared not to mind bad spelling: a couple of the handwritten signs read STOP THE SENCELESS VIOLENCE and AMY BIEHL, OUR COMERADE.

The small group walked down the street toward the marimba music. Linda wore her sunglasses; she would have made a great first lady, at once regal and Midwestern, warm but removed, with the looks of an aging, corn-fed beauty queen. Everyone followed. Locals, sitting on low walls and smoking on milk crates, watched with little interest. A young man in long shorts stood outside the TyreMan Tyre Shop and clapped without knowing why.

Ntobeko, who saw the group coming, walked slowly away, expertly disappearing into the township. His daughter, the little girl in purple, grabbed Linda’s hand tightly. She wasn’t even in kindergarten, but she knew the drill. The full-color image promptly appeared in *The Orange County Register*, accompanying a story on love and reconciliation in South Africa:

Linda Biehl, front left, walks with Avile Peni, 3, the daughter of one of the four men convicted and imprisoned for her daughter Amy Biehl’s death on August 25, 1993.

The group arrived at the marble cross, the kids stopped playing, and everyone briefly grappled with what to do next. Somebody had placed upon the memorial a blown-up old photo of the late Peter Biehl, a smiling, white-haired man with the chunked-out build of a retired college football player, flanked by a young Easy flashing a peace sign and a young Ntobeko grinning broadly; it had been taken during their first meeting and was weighed down with a cracked brick, of the sort that had been used to bludgeon Amy. Amy’s old Cape Town university colleagues had offered to arrange a memorial day a while back but hadn’t done anything, so this whole makeshift show had been put together on the fly in the days since Linda had landed a week earlier.

“Who wants to give a speech?” Linda asked. A curly-haired former colleague of Amy’s stood up, said a few words about her departed friend, let out a sob, and threw herself into Linda’s arms. Linda patted her while maintaining a close-mouthed smile; the photographer snapped away. Some others filed before the small crowd and spoke about the loveliness of Amy, the strength of Linda, and the importance of grace and transformation. Nancy, holding her STOP THE SENCELESS VIOLENCE sign, took the stage for twenty minutes, during which her husband shot her a stream of “cut-it-short” glares, which she ignored.

“Amy was a beautiful soul!” Nancy said. She wore wire-rim glasses and long colorful earrings.

I stood away from the group and leaned against a white sedan. Mzi Noji, a middle-aged, unemployed ex-militant, ex-con, and army veteran, arrived on foot, wearing his green cap, embroidered with the phrase UNIVERSAL MESSAGE over a Rastafarian flag. Mzi was a lifelong social activist, raised during the height of the anti-apartheid struggle. Even today, when he claimed that he wanted to get on with his life, he continually found himself embroiled in protests, marches, negotiations, meetings, neighborhood committees, and organizations.

I’d met Mzi by chance a year earlier, and he had become an unexpected kindred spirit, as well as my guide, my translator, my friend. He accompanied me on my expeditions and investigations into the Amy Biehl story, often driving my car and dredging up forgotten people from within the depths of the townships. Mzi was also to be my key to unraveling the truth, or as much truth as possible, of what really happened on that fateful day twenty years before.

Until I met Mzi at a burger shop downtown, I had been tracking the same story that every journalist before me had written, except that my aim had been to tell for the first time the full tale as it stretched over two decades. But Mzi informed me that he believed that this long-accepted story of the circumstances of Amy’s death was not exactly accurate. His revelation had led me, in a series of nearly unbelievable coincidences, to a meeting I had had the day before. After months of frenzied searching, I had finally found an old and ruined man who had also been in Gugulethu on August 25, 1993, though few remembered him. Nobody had ever told his account of that day, nor made the chilling links between what had happened to him and what had happened to Amy Biehl five hours later and a quarter mile away. The old man knew something about brutal mobs and racial violence, and he was the final piece in the jigsaw I had been painstakingly piecing together for two years.

Mzi sidled up next to me, his cap pulled low over his deep-set eyes. He was tall and strong, with a little paunch he was self-conscious about, so he was always abstaining from chocolate milkshakes even though he loved them. We each crossed our arms on the roof of the sedan and rested our chins on our forearms. By then, Easy had reappeared and parked the van to the side of the memorial, and was hiding behind us, hoping he would not be called on to talk. He was mumbling: Man, he hoped Makhulu did not make him stand up before the group.

“Amy was an accidental hero,” Nancy said.

Mzi’s hands were shaking. He looked down at them, and so did I.

“Her death was a Shakespearean tragedy!” Nancy said.

The old lady and the girl had hit up everyone, I noticed. Every lapel boasted a beaded pin and a cutout heart.

“Linda is strong, charismatic, beautiful,” Nancy said.

I looked around. I felt a surge of fury, inexplicable in its intensity. I moved closer to Mzi. In a few days, his great-aunt’s house would burn down, with his great-aunt inside. Just like his own mother’s house back in the old days of politics and firestorms, when the ANC kids in the neighborhood shot it full of lead and set it alight with petrol bombs. Now there was no liberation movement to blame, no just cause or grand scheme, no enemies intent on your demise. Just faulty wiring and cheap petroleum heaters. Mzi was listening intently to Nancy, his face set in that practiced flat expression of his, composed specifically to shroud the fact that he was almost always overwhelmed by various emotions.

Nancy praised Easy and Ntobeko. This was a story of “gentle forgiveness,” she said. “Of lived apology!”

When she finished her speech, the crowd applauded.

Linda stood before her guests. She looked for Easy and Ntobeko. Ntobeko was long gone, so she called for Easy. A sharp intake of breath, back straightened, and then he emerged from behind us and went to her. Easy hooked his arm in Linda’s and stood with her as a local reporter scribbled, a pair of student videographers filmed, the hometown newspaper photographer snapped away. Linda began to say her part. Easy and I looked at each other for the briefest of moments, eye-to-eye above the small crowd, and then he turned back to smile for the cameras.

2.

They tell me: eat and drink. Be glad to be among the haves!

But how can I eat and drink

When I take what I eat from the starving

And those who thirst do not have my glass of water?

And yet I eat and drink.

—BERTOLT BRECHT, “To Those Who Follow in Our Wake”

When I went to live in South Africa in November 2011, I didn’t know what to expect, and I didn’t reflect on it. My husband, Sam, then my fiancé, wanted to return on sabbatical to the country he had left at age eighteen, so I followed. Career-wise, I was untethered. Years earlier, I had published a light travel memoir to nobody’s notice, and since then I had no real writing prospects as far as I could tell. Every single article I pitched to magazines was rejected. I kept submitting short stories set in Montana to literary journal contests, in the hopes of winning \$500, but I only came in as runner-up twice, so I actually lost money, since it usually cost \$20 to enter. To make ends meet, I had taken to editing a celebrity doctor’s website, despite having no medical knowledge. If Sam wanted to move across the world, I had no argument against it.

Soon after Sam took off to find us a place in Cape Town, I sold the old SUV I’d had for years, moved my boxes to a storage locker in New Jersey, packed an oversized duffel bag full of clothes, forced my flailing dog into a travel-safe crate at the JFK cargo terminal, and hurtled fourteen hours across the ocean to Johannesburg. Sam met me at Arrivals. We planned to drive the nine hundred miles to Cape Town rather than put the dog on another connecting flight, so we rented a car and cut through the Karoo desert.

Karoo, which means “land of thirst” in the indigenous Khoikhoi language, is a vast, bleak scrubland that stretches through the country, searingly hot in the afternoon and cold as steel at night. Sheep roam across its inhospitable terrain, dotted with rugged little shepherds’ dwellings where young boys with hard feet spend months alone. I sat in the passenger seat and gazed out the window at the monotonous landscape. It looked like a place picked over, as if anything of value, anything lush or desirable or even a little bit sweet or pretty, had been collected by a determined band of looters sweeping across the plain, leaving behind only dry bush and dust. The N1 highway slices through that rugged expanse, wide and smooth and lonely.

Only a few hours from Johannesburg, we came upon a gruesome car accident. The remains of a car sat diagonally across two lanes, its mangled hood smashed into its windshield, its roof sliced clean off. The pavement was strewn with glass, sparkling like crystals in the high spring sun, and a couple of truckers had pulled to the side to call for help and to snap cellphone photos. Some merciful soul had rolled a heavy woolen blanket across the top of the car to try to conceal three bodies sitting upright.

The image lingers bright and precise in my mind: two men flank a woman in the back of the ruined car, which was slammed—by what? a tractor trailer?—with such force that the passengers must have died on impact but were not ejected from their seats, perhaps because they were packed so tight in there. All three are slender with dark brown skin, and young, judging by their builds. The woman wears a pink T-shirt. Her hair is jet black and plaited into stiff shoulder-length braids that stick out in all different directions—like Pippi Longstocking, I remember thinking.

From then on, we drove slowly and anxiously to the guesthouse where we planned to stay the night. It was situated in the stark Northern Cape desert town of Colesburg, the halfway point between Johannesburg and Cape Town, where it seemed every other home offered a bed for weary travelers. The owner, an elderly man of British ancestry, led us to our room, a white square filled with pink floral pillows, a pink comforter marred by a tiny blood spot, and a knitted woolen throw so rough

that the dog used it to scratch her back. The decoration was minimal: a single straw hat, pinned with a fake rose, nailed to the wall.

That night, we drove through the town, which gave the impression of overwhelming flatness—flat roads, flat land, flat houses—and ate tasteless, mushy vegetables at a pub patronized only by white people. After, we stopped for snacks at a local twenty-four-hour shop. As I stood in line to pay for chips and a drink, a tired-looking light-brown-skinned woman at the register spoke to me in a heavy Germanic-sounding language I couldn't understand. She was, Sam explained, a colored woman, a term that sounds offensively retrograde to Americans but is in fact the designation for the population of mixed-race South Africans. The language she had directed at me was Afrikaans, a derivation of Old Dutch spoken mainly by South Africa's colored people and white Afrikaners, the descendants of early European settlers.

The next day, as we were leaving, we chatted with our host, a former school principal who said he had taken a buyout package for state employees when the black majority came to power in 1994. He had retired early to run this unique interpretation of an inn.

"So, what's the population of Colesburg?" Sam asked.

"Two thousand whites, five thousand coloreds, and fifteen thousand blacks," the man answered. That was how he automatically understood his hometown—as a collection of people broken into racial categories. We herded the dog into the car and headed toward our final destination: Cape Town.



The Western Cape contains the southernmost tip of the African continent. European explorers and kings and queens had long agreed that if they could only round the Cape, they would be able to sail northeast to India and open a sea route to Asia, with its silks and spices and gemstones and teas. Such a route would prove lucrative to European powers, which had so far only managed to arrange an arduous and dangerous trade trek through the Middle East, which was teeming with bandits and costly middlemen. The only problem, as the Europeans saw it, was the Cape's habit of swallowing ships.

On February 3, 1488, the square-jawed Portuguese voyager Bartolomeu Dias and his crew anchored near a freshwater spring in a fishing village known today as Mossel Bay. Dias had departed Lisbon seven months earlier in an attempt to chart a new southern route to Asia, and he and his haggard crew had just survived a harrowing storm. Above, watching from a bluff, stood a group of Khoikhoi tribesmen, indigenous cattle farmers with yellow-brown skin, standing around five feet tall.

The Khoikhoi, grazing their animals by the sea on that day in the fifteenth century, watched as a vessel full of ashen humans docked in their watering hole and started taking water. The Khoikhoi were not a particularly warmongering group, but, angry and frightened, they pelted the explorers with rocks. The whites responded with gunshots, killing a Khoikhoi before sailing away.

Though Dias wished to continue charting the eastbound journey, his bedraggled crew threatened mutiny, and so the ship stopped at what is now known as Bushman's River, where Dias planted a Portuguese flag and then turned homeward. One cold comfort for Dias was that he had at least laid eyes on the meridional tip of Africa, a rocky point of land where waves crashed relentlessly against the shore and heavy winds blew through tough grasses and low, hardy scrubs. The balmy currents of the Indian Ocean here meet the arctic currents of the Atlantic. From a height, one can see the two bodies of water tangle together in a shaky line of wild white foam that stretches past the horizon.

These waters had pushed Dias blindly out to sea, and Dias, returning home after seventeen months with his men, named the area Cabo das Tormentas, or Cape of Storms. King John II of Portugal, who saw the Cape as a stop on the profitable opening to the East, rebranded it Cabo da Boa Esperança, or Cape of Good Hope. But Dias had been prescient: twelve years later, on another

journey, he and his crew were swallowed whole by the Cabo das Tormentas, their sunken ship never found.

Dias's bearded compatriot Vasco da Gama was more successful. In 1497, he was the first to navigate an all-water eastern passage. Da Gama rode the winds down the African coast, then arced into the Atlantic and swept back toward land, docking for supplies and water in an inlet on the Western Cape today known as St. Helena Bay. There, the threatened Khoikhoi again attacked, spearing da Gama in the thigh. Undeterred, da Gama and his crew continued down the coast and rounded its tip. Again, they came upon a tribe of Khoikhoi, but this time they enjoyed better relations, offering gifts. Da Gama even danced with some locals.

The good vibes were short lived. As was the Portuguese habit, da Gama took water supplies without asking the chief for permission. The Khoikhoi, aghast at da Gama's slight, readied themselves to attack, and da Gama quickly sailed off to the western coast of India, which he would reach in 1498 with the help of an Arab navigator he picked up in East Africa. In 1510, the Khoikhoi slaughtered sixty-five Europeans, including a Portuguese viceroy heading home after his term in the East—a massacre that resulted in a century during which ships gave the Cape a wide berth.

This was the inauspicious beginning of the relationship between blacks and whites in South Africa, a relationship that began with whites taking natural resources that both groups assumed were rightfully theirs. In a foretelling of events to be replayed in centuries to come, the blacks threw stones, and the whites responded with bullets.



A year before landing in Cape Town, I'd been to South Africa on holiday. Those days in the Karoo had offered me a hint that living in the country would be nothing like that three-week vacation, when we took a safari just outside of Kruger Park and saw a pride of lions, dozens of elephants, the far-off silhouette of a leopard, and a pack of endangered spotted African wild dogs chilling out in the bush, licking their balls and nuzzling each other like regular pets, except that they could run at forty miles an hour to gut and devour a gazelle. In Cape Town, we lay about on palm-tree-lined beaches, which were too sunny for my New England tastes. The white people on the beaches—and there were mostly white people on the wealthy stretch of beachside suburbs known as the Atlantic Seaboard—looked like descendants of Russian oligarchs, *Baywatch* actors, and/or the cast of your average reality television program: lots of enhanced breasts and chiseled six-packs, displayed with unabashed vanity.

But when I settled in Cape Town for two years, I found the city disconcerting. I landed in a white enclave by the seaside, where my husband's Jewish family and their insular, tight-knit community lived in the houses typical of well-off South Africans: pale-colored cement rectangles surrounded by high walls lined with barbed coils, electric shock wire, or shards of broken glass.

The white Capetonians I met at first had been raised in a country steeped in racist policy and educated according to a racist curriculum. History books reinvented colonial commandos who slaughtered indigenous people as heroes. During apartheid most whites had never seen the living conditions of blacks. Opposition groups were banned, their leaders in exile or prison. The media was heavily censored. In 1977, for example, 1,246 publications, 41 periodicals, and 41 films were banned in South Africa—most of them putting forth an anti-apartheid view. The government also controlled TV, radio, and, to some extent, newspapers. After apartheid, most whites still turned away from the reality of daily life for their black compatriots, never visiting townships, denying or justifying the continued inequities between the races. Therefore, most white South Africans of a certain age, and accordingly their children, had become—through grand design, through osmosis, and through their own choice to accept the status quo—entrenched in racism.

A friend of mine once suggested that an anthropologist would do well to study the ways of the white tribes of South Africa. The white Capetonians I met liked working out, getting their hair done,

shopping, displaying large diamonds, driving flashy cars, eating sushi, and cooing at their dogs, both pedigreed and rescued. They referred to things that tickled their fancies as “stunning,” “spectacular,” “unreal,” and “*out of this world*.” They dished local gossip and talked about money and business. They discussed families who had been lucky enough to emigrate to the major white South African resettlement destinations: the States, the U.K., Israel, Australia, Canada. No matter how many assets a person possessed in South Africa, he was guaranteed to moan about the country going to pot, and how a trailer in Sydney was better than a mansion in the most beautiful city of the most advanced country on this doomed continent.

They peppered mundane conversation topics with casual mentions of the black majority, most of whom they feared and few of whom they knew on a personal level. South Africa has no ingrained culture of “political correctness,” and so, on the subject of race, many people are generally far more forthright, nonchalant, and openly offensive than Americans. The white South Africans I met casually attributed to black people a number of negative characteristics: laziness, dishonesty, savagery, stupidity, ungratefulness, ugliness. They were puzzled by my sputtering protests, and regarded me as a naive foreigner (which I was, but for other reasons). They blamed all the problems in modern-day South Africa not on an intricate and complex set of political and socioeconomic issues running back centuries, but rather on the intrinsically hideous qualities of blacks. If the country was going to pot, this was because black people were fundamentally incapable of leadership. Presenting them with an endless list of horrible white leaders throughout history did nothing to change their minds.

“Blacks are lazy, and you’d know that if you worked at a corporate. I’m not being racist, I’m just stating the facts.”

“Sponsor a black child to go to school? Oh, right, because they end up being such *model citizens*.”

“I sure as hell *am* racist. The difference for you liberal Americans is your population is fifteen percent of them, but ours is nearly ninety percent.”

“It’s about the trees. They came down from the damn trees.”

“It’s not racist to be scared of black people. It’s realistic.”

The people who said such things were not dropouts from the boonies. Rather, they were well educated and widely traveled: a lawyer, a businessman, a designer, a farmer, a small business owner. And they were decent people, too. The racists of South Africa are a kindly lot, who are helpful and resourceful, community-minded and polite. They’re a good laugh, fine company, and fantastic to have by your side if you’re in a pickle. These very bigots, many of whom I hardly knew, have driven me across the country, saved my dog’s life, provided me top-notch medical care, given me free room and board when I needed it most, generously hosted me in their homes, and cooked me meals. And they don’t just help other white people. I have seen them feed the poor colored beggars, even as they roll their eyes; offer free and compassionate legal advice to the very black people for whom they have previously expressed disdain; put their gardener’s children through school; and buy beautiful houses for their maids, complete with furniture.

Usually, when the racists know black people personally, they are capable of seeing them as individuals. But on a larger level, to them black South Africans seem to meld together with their inept, corrupt black leaders, into an indiscernible mass, a majority that is steering the country toward mayhem: economic free fall, widespread violent crime, a crumbling public healthcare system, a broken government peopled with cronies. It is this mass—not specific members of it—that is the enemy. Before the mass existed (or more accurately, when it was disempowered and hidden), white South Africans lived in a kind of utopia: agreeable dirt-cheap labor, all the fruits of a gifted land, beauty everywhere for the taking, lovely neighborhoods with open doors, and all the suffering contained behind borders at a good distance.

Once I asked Easy about a friend of his whose actions were inconsistent. What he said makes as much sense as anything: “He’s a human being. Sometimes he’s good, sometimes he’s evil. Sometimes he is *comme ci*. Sometimes he is *comme ça*.”

I met plenty of exceptional white South Africans, of course. I came to know a yoga teacher whose many boyfriends spanned the racial spectrum, and a corporate mom born into a conservative Afrikaner family who married a Congolese basketball player. I spent time with some of the old white freedom fighters, who remained as committed to racial equality and justice as ever. I hung around a bunch of my husband’s high school friends, well-off thirty-something men who were focused on their various apolitical endeavors, like creating a Burning Man–type festival in Africa or bringing Cape Town its first New York–style Jewish deli or attending ayahuasca ceremonies for spiritual healing. And I knew plenty of young white activists who worked with the country’s most disadvantaged, including a man fluent in the Zimbabwean tongue of Shona who had devoted his life to helping African refugees gain footing in a new land.

However, according to the wealthy white citizens I met at first, townships—the impoverished zones created by the apartheid government to segregate black South Africans—were the epicenters of the crime epidemic sweeping the country, the places out of which black badness oozed. During apartheid, people of color had little access to white areas, generally allowed in during the day to work but banned after close of business. Once the laws that controlled people’s movement had been dismantled, that violence spilled out, affecting whites as well as everyone else (though whites complained most vigorously, crime actually affected them far less than it did their dark-skinned compatriots). South Africa, with its soaring crime rate, was now among the world’s most violent countries, with a murder rate five times that of the global average. Every day across the country there were 502 assaults, 475 robberies, 172 sexual offenses, 47 murders, and 31 carjackings. Every day, 714 houses were burgled, 202 businesses were robbed, and 349 cars were broken into.

Instead of seeing these daily terrors as the result of tyranny, many South African whites came to associate them with the enduring *swaart gevaar*, or black danger. The threat of the *swaart gevaar*—the concept of an overwhelming and inherently bloodthirsty black majority that needed to be contained lest it consume everything in its path—had been used to persuade a white electorate to vote into power in 1948 the National Party, whose platform came to be known as apartheid.

I could see these townships, Gugulethu in particular, from the highway leading away from the airport: a glimmering sea of corrugated tin shacks separated from the road by only a strip of grass, upon which I once saw a man squatting for a shit while casually flipping through a magazine. This accounted for the faint fecal stink that wafted out from the slums, especially on hot days. I was eager to see inside, but I was informed, repeatedly, of the dangers of those ghettos, which teemed with ruthless gangs high on a type of rough local crystal meth called *tik*.

In an old *Lonely Planet* guidebook I found, nestled between reviews for the extravagant high tea at the pink Mount Nelson Hotel and a most pleasant ride up the aerial cableway to Table Mountain, I read a quick note on the townships, which were situated in the Cape Flats, a depressed belt of sand and bedrock southeast of the city known as “apartheid’s dumping ground”:

For the majority of Cape Town’s inhabitants, home is one of the grim townships of the Cape Flats: Gugulethu, Nyanga, Philippi, Mitchell’s Plain, Crossroads, or Khayelitsha. Visiting without a companion who has local knowledge would be foolish. If a black friend is happy to escort you, you should have no problems.

Lacking an amenable black escort at the time, I waited until one day, less than a month into my stay, an opportunity to pass over those allegedly dangerous borders presented itself. Sam was setting up a project aimed at improving the delivery of basic social services for the poor, and he had been invited by an NGO to see the conditions in Khayelitsha, a sprawling township of nearly 400,000 people just north of Gugulethu. He asked me if I’d like to come along.

On that hot day in November, we met two women at the organization's headquarters off a main road, a chilly refurbished municipal building surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by a groundskeeper and his two sooty dogs. The lead guide was a fat and pretty black lady, with a flawless complexion and a short ponytail. Her assistant, also black, was a grave, slender woman with cropped hair and glasses; the left side of her body, running from her chin to her hand, had been consumed by fire long ago, and the skin was knotted with scar tissue.

Townships are divided, roughly, into formal and informal areas. The formal areas are generally those built up with simple cement houses along paved streets. Most were constructed years ago by the apartheid government, and have been, over time, expanded by their inhabitants, repainted various colors, remodeled and tricked out or neglected and allowed to fester. Some were constructed more recently by the new black-led government under the Reconstruction and Development Programme, which aimed to help close the massive gap between the rich and poor, and white and brown. These are known as "RDP houses," and tend to be small, relatively new, identical matchbox homes clustered together. The key to such a house is obtained by languishing on a waiting list. Woven between, behind, and among the legal homes is a web of backyard shacks, built by homeowners and rented out in an underground township economy.

The formal areas also contain hostels taken over by squatters. During apartheid, companies housed black migrant laborers in single-sex dormitory-like structures, carting them to and from manual jobs each day and allowing them one month a year to visit their families in the rural areas designated for most blacks. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as apartheid edged toward its demise and the townships became increasingly ungovernable, the companies abandoned these buildings and the workers and their families took over. Twenty years later, they still live in cramped, deteriorating quarters under faded signs bearing the names of the original owners: WJM CONSTRUCTION CORP, UME STEEL LTD, DAIRY-BELLE PTY. Pigeons roost in the broken shower stalls. Once in a while, a police tow truck pulls out from a hostel's courtyard, dragging a stolen car behind it.

Informal settlements are plots of previously barren urban land upon which people squat, usually in haphazard tin shacks. They are meant to be temporary, but often become permanent as their inhabitants, mired in poverty, fail to either score an RDP house or rent a better spot. The settlements rise up on township borders and on undesirable land within. They contain a mixture of city-born locals, migrants from the underdeveloped South African countryside, and refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented aliens from repressive Zimbabwe, impoverished Ethiopia, war-torn Somalia, war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo, and war-torn Burundi. Since the settlements are not government-approved, they receive little in terms of services and once in a while are unceremoniously torn down.

Our guides lived in one such settlement, a maze of makeshift matchbox houses set on gray sand. The plumper woman lived in a tidy single room with her husband, a few children, and the inevitable rat or two. She called her young son, a shirtless ten-year-old with a mischievous smile, and instructed him to watch our car, which we parked in a dirt yard. We would conduct the tour on foot, since the pathways far into the shantytowns—tiny, potholed roads that passed through insecure territories—weren't built for vehicles. We were deep inside Khayelitsha now, invisible to the outside world.

"See how we are living," a woman called from behind a low wire fence as we trudged through the sand. In her shack, a flat-screen TV played a daytime soap, and a bunch of people sat on stools, drinking brandy, waving at us. "Come in, come see how we live."

Trash piled up in a stagnant, water-filled ditch beside the houses. Children with crusty faces played by a pile of refuse, where a herd of goats feasted. The garbage was laced with rat poison. During the rainy season, when water seeped into the shacks and sewage spilled into the streets, kids came down with diarrhea. A pack of dogs slunk by, all grown in the township canine mold: of medium size, sporting short pale-brown fur, with pointy ears pressed low against the head. A few weeks earlier, a different rogue pack of mutts had broken into a shack and mauled a child to death, so the people

were in the mood to stone them. A barefoot white man with dreadlocks and a long beard lay in the lap of a black woman, her hair tied back with a violet scarf. They wore stained pajamas and faced the sun.

We passed a low swampland on the border of the highway, shacks built among the reeds; in the rain, pungent murky water rose up through the floors of each house, whose lightbulbs were powered by a spaghetti of ragged lines jury-rigged from the power poles. The shack dwellers were unmoved by posters urging South Africans to KEEP OUR COUNTRY POWER-FUL, part of a nationwide campaign to curb electricity theft.

Toilets were often buckets or the fetid fields by the highway, where people squatted in the open as cars whizzed by, the worlds so separate that neither the drivers nor the defecators seemed concerned by each other's humanity. Some portable toilets had been provided by companies that had won city contracts, but they were rarely cleaned or emptied, and the resulting indignities had led, in part, to the Poo Wars. Worse, such toilets could easily be toppled, as the installers sometimes skimped on cash by failing to secure them to the ground. Local criminals pushed the unstable toilets over while people were inside, reached in, grabbed cellphones or cash, and left their victims scrambling amid a soup of age-old human waste and neon-blue chemical sludge. Kids on their way to pee in the pitch-black night were hit by cars or snatched off a path and molested. Adults who needed to expel before a morning shift at work were mugged for their cellphones as they hiked in the dim predawn light. The whole area shared a dozen or so communal taps. I tried to figure out how a person could bathe, the dwellings pressed so close together.

"What about privacy?" I asked the assistant.

"Privacy?" She let out a bitter laugh. "There is no privacy."

The women led us past a row of yellow three-room houses built by an Irish charity. I admired the houses, popping out cheerfully from the mass of gray corrugated tin and old timber, the address numbers painted in pastels by the front doors, accented by a little cartoon flower. The assistant pointed to a ramshackle two-story gray manor at the path's corner, its roof supported by uneven columns. At the base of the manor was an austere grocery shop manned by an aging grocer in a white hat.

Teenage boys laughed and shared cigarettes by a little spaza shop, a bodega that sells soda, candy, chips, phone cards. A man shaved his friend's head on a stoop, dipping his razor and soap in and out of a bucket. Children brightened as we passed, reached for our hands. Finally, we came upon the tour's ultimate destination: a square of sand, smoke rising from its edges. People were bringing buckets of water and pieces of wood and iron back and forth.

"It burned last night," the guide explained, ushering us into the smoldering lot. Of the three shacks that previously stood here, only outlines on the ground remained, debris all around. Nobody knew how the fire had started—a cigarette in bed? An electrical outage? A gas stove? Or maybe somebody had a grudge; it was not unheard of to lock an enemy in his shack and set it alight, leaving him to pound at the door as he burned. Once a spark caught, all nearby shacks could be consumed by flames; in these tight quarters, built of thin flammable materials, fire spread fast, and sometimes it took out hundreds of shacks before a fire truck could arrive and control the blaze. Whole neighborhoods were flattened and rebuilt on the regular. Our guide had twice lost her home to fire and once lost her shack when the city council resettled her whole block to make room for a new power plant. She had come home to find a slash of red spray paint across her door, marking her place as one to be removed.

"They just painted my door," she said, shaking her head. I imagined the municipal worker, living in some nicer part of town, brandishing his red can of paint as he strode down these sandy paths, past shelter after shelter patched together, he assumed, with garbage. What's the difference if you slash a red mark across a mound of trash?

At the empty lot, a group of women stood at an incline. One was tall and busty, in her fifties, wearing a long skirt and a T-shirt that displayed her pendulous breasts. Her arm was wrapped around a smaller, darker woman with thin shoulders and short hair. The guide explained to us: it was this

smaller woman whose house had burned and whose father had died in the smoke and fire. She was silent, standing among the remains of her home, staring at us with red-rimmed eyes.

We had been joined on the tour by a gangly ginger-haired American research fellow who, within three minutes of meeting a person, compulsively conveyed that his wife was a black South African.

“Can I give money?” he asked awkwardly, his face reddening. The guide grew equally uncomfortable and shrugged.

We passed the assistant’s shack on the way out. She called her six-year-old daughter to come meet us. The girl had a heart-shaped face, a missing front tooth, and short hair in little twists.

“Hello,” I said. “What is your name?”

“Yes, teacher, thank you, teacher,” she said, batting her eyelashes.

Later, as Sam and I drove away, the streets grew wide and smooth as the township receded. Heavy-bottomed palm trees lined the road. The people were soon lighter and taller, as if to match the ivory buildings that rose along the crashing sea. The restaurants were full of diners ordering calamari and chicken caesar salads. In the distance, along the promenade, the iconic red-and-white-striped Mouille Point lighthouse sparkled, and silky dogs ran after tennis balls in its shadow.

At the time, we were living in a dull, cold rental apartment, which was angled so that not even the smallest beam of sun could enter, ever. On one side, shaded windows overlooked a golf course, and on the other side, small, high windows overlooked an open hallway that circled an interior courtyard. These windows above the courtyard presented an acoustic nightmare that sent the din of a radio in another apartment or the low pitch of a conversation in the common area directly into our living room at top volume. I hated the place, with its walls coated in mold in the winter and its unflattering fluorescent lights. In the basement, the storage areas used by residents had once been rooms where black and colored maids would sleep. A few communal bathrooms, which included toilets and showers, had been built in the hallways during apartheid so that the help did not use their boss’s private facilities.

But on that day, the flat took on new characteristics. It was luxury, pure and simple, with its sturdy walls, its two secure locks, windows to protect against the elements, plentiful electricity, and a bathroom and toilet of its own. I stood in a scalding hot shower and felt filthy rich. I never wanted to go back to the townships and I wanted to go back immediately.

But you couldn’t just wander aimlessly around there. It was too far from town for a pop-in, and there weren’t, for example, coffee shops with Wi-Fi where a person could hang out. So I started to research various NGOs that did work there. I asked around, again surveying the people I knew, but I was only met with gestures of concern. It seemed that I was a not uncommon species of foreigner who thinks a bleeding heart or a hankering for a taste of “real Africa” will keep her safe as she wanders, smiling dimly and handing out lollipops, through destitute black areas. So in my search for volunteer work, I was met, several times, with the same question, uttered with a mixture of irritation and concern:

“Haven’t you heard of Amy Biehl?” people said. “Better not come down with Amy Biehl Syndrome.”



I was twelve when Amy Biehl was killed, and not up on international news, so I had never heard of her. Now, with no friends in South Africa and only a bit of freelance work trickling in, I had plenty of time to burrow into that Internet rabbit hole. I began to look into the story of the young white scholar attacked by the black mob. The tale had been covered at length, with over 100,000 search results on Google. For days, I read articles and studied images. The murder had been so odd, the fury so misplaced, and the choice of victim so ironic. The story, as it rolled out before me in backlit print, conveniently followed along the country’s timeline for the past nearly two decades: oppression,

inequality, activism, protest, race-based violence, imprisonment, freedom, amnesty, reconciliation. Over the years, the headlines themselves traced the arc of recent history:

A BRUTALIZED GENERATION TURNS ITS RAGE ON WHITES

(*The New York Times*, 1993)

THREE BLACKS FOUND GUILTY OF “RACIST” KILLING

(*The Herald*, Glasgow, 1994)

SOUTH AFRICANS APOLOGIZE TO FAMILY OF AMERICAN VICTIM

(*The New York Times*, 1997)

4 SOUTH AFRICAN KILLERS OF U.S. STUDENT GET AMNESTY

(*Chicago Tribune*, 1998)

BIEHL PARENT, APARTHEID FIGHTER BRIDGE GAP

(*The Santa Fe New Mexican*, 2004)

IN SOUTH AFRICA, AN IMPROBABLE TALE OF FORGIVENESS

(*Los Angeles Times*, 2008)

This was a microcosm of South Africa for twenty years, and it was the hopeful story people liked to tell and be told. The oppressed, once driven to wanton disorder, now displayed an unreal spirit of forgiveness. They were led by Mandela himself, who, after twenty-seven years in prison, forgave his oppressors. At his inauguration, his jailer was given VIP seating. The end result was white people and black people who had endured a terrible time locked in an embrace. As far as stories go, Amy Biehl’s was pretty perfect in terms of PR for South Africa, the rainbow nation. And America, with its generous ambassadors in the form of Linda and Peter and martyred activist Amy, didn’t come out too badly either. The whole thing was so peculiar that I couldn’t stop reading about it.

Over dinner, I reported my findings to Sam, who had been fourteen at the time of Amy’s death and eighteen during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, and so remembered her name and the basics of the story, but not much more. I went over the murder, the particularly undeserving victim, the famed amnesty, the remarkable show of mercy, the close relationship between the mother and the men, who even called Linda Biehl “Grandmother” in Xhosa.

I mentioned it to my conservative in-laws, who didn’t understand why anyone would ever reward their daughter’s killers with a job. Their dinner guests were equally unimpressed by the tale—the general story they knew by heart but the details they only vaguely remembered. One posited that such a gesture might encourage other black folks to kill white girls in order to score jobs, and she could not be dissuaded by the fact that over the course of nearly twenty years, nobody had ever done such a thing. Later that week, as Sam and I sat in the park by the sea, I expounded upon the story again.

“You sound pretty interested in this,” he finally said. “Why don’t you write about it?”

In the following days, I tried to locate a book on the subject, convinced that surely somebody had already covered this singular story at length. Indeed, many journalists had filed reports in all forms of media. There had been documentaries and talk shows. A South African playwright, inspired by Linda Biehl’s act of compassion, had even written a fictionalized account, *Mother to Mother*, which she then adapted into a one-woman play that toured every few years. But nobody had ever written a book.

So I drafted a letter to Linda, and sent it to an email address at her Cape Town-based foundation. I explained myself: *I would like to examine the story of Amy’s life, her death, and what happened after—including your and Mr. Biehl’s forgiveness of and relationship with Easy Nofemela and Ntobeko Peni, and the continued work of the foundation—and to write about it, possibly something book-length. I’d like to explore who Amy was and how she got here, as well as what her life and legacy means for South Africa today, nearly twenty years after her death and the end of apartheid.*

Thirteen hours passed and then a little red circle appeared on my mail app: *I would be happy to chat ... almost 20 years has passed since the event occurred and the story like South Africa is very complicated. You are welcome to call.*

3.

Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy.

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

I called Linda Biehl in January 2012, a day after receiving her email. After her husband's sudden death from colon cancer ten years earlier, Linda had sold her Newport Beach house and had thus far not settled down elsewhere. She kept no permanent residence, and instead hopped around the States, flashing her Delta gold card, crashing with her three surviving children in Florida, Pennsylvania, and California, and helping out with the grandkids—and there were six, divided among the households. Once or twice a year, she bought a ticket to South Africa and went to check up on her foundation. Universities and private organizations sometimes hired her to give a speech on reconciliation. Journalists writing about South Africa or forgiveness or an activist's murder called her once in a while for a quote.

I'd expected a reticent woman, soft-spoken and probably super-Christian. How else, I wondered, but for a serious devotion to biblical standards with which I was admittedly unfamiliar, could a person so intensely forgive and love those who had so powerfully sinned against her?

"No, I find Christianity to be as hypocritical as anything in the world can be," Linda said during our first conversation. I hadn't asked her a thing about religion; Linda had just offered it up.

Linda was an engaging storyteller whose tales were dotted with full names of individuals both grand and obscure. She repeated her favorite stories at length, their details precise and unwavering, before she veered off, and I was left with notebooks full of loops, question marks, and arrows. And though she rarely paused long enough for anyone to interrupt her, I soon found that she would eventually, unaided, answer any question I might have, and more. Simply put, she spoke so much and had presumably been asked the same predictable questions so many times that she ended up covering nearly every relevant topic without being asked.

"Religion has nothing to do with it," she said during the first conversation.

I wanted to ask: So what *does* have to do with it? But she was already talking about her fascination with traditional Xhosa beliefs, and about how she once got sick swilling home brew in an unsealed clay mug in the township. She talked about how the white dinner party circuit bored and upset her; she recalled how a wealthy Cape Town hostess had once asked her to lie silently on a reclining chair in the parlor of a mansion and listen to classical music before eating delivery pizza—a misguided attempt at highbrow entertaining.

"I blame sanctions!" she said. Apartheid-era sanctions were imposed on the country by an international community that had, by the 1980s, become increasingly disapproving of the country's race-based legislation. Sanctions deprived South Africans of Western popular culture, prevented their beloved Springbok rugby and cricket teams from competing internationally, stymied the economy, and forced the elite to make up their own weird interpretations of European-style sophistication. White people tended to be obsessed with Europe and America, and they craved the fancy mores practiced in those far-off lands. But they were separated from them, and could only turn to each other. The result, which endured, seemed to be that a group of people, using rumors passed down from those who had visited abroad, had more or less imagined a collection of styles and manners. The older set still adored frilly and opulent furniture set up in odd configurations and stared down upon by a collection of stern, literal oil paintings.

Linda talked about her love of jazz and art history and about her grandkids. One was an actress. Two were star athletes. One played the drums. Her youngest granddaughter, then five years old, reminded everyone of a little Amy: spirited, energetic, sweet. Sometimes the little girl, absorbed in play, would look up and say, "I'm with Aunt Amy now."

In 2012, Linda was trying to pull out of the foundation and devote herself entirely to her family in America, but she seemed incapable of truly making the move, tethered to the country that took her daughter from her. She talked affectionately about Easy and Ntobeko, whom she seemed to care for as if they were her own occasionally wayward and disobedient middle-aged man-children. Ntobeko was her favored son; his many accomplishments, large and small, filled her with pride. She talked about how these new relationships had cost her friends from the old days, people who had known her before she became, suddenly, a part of South African history and a paragon of reconciliation.

“I myself am a figure of curiosity and controversy,” she said, sighing. “Sometimes I wonder how and why did I ever do this?”

For the next four months, in an attempt to acquire a satisfactory answer to the question Linda had posed, I interviewed her over the phone. I visited a professor at the University of Cape Town and convinced him to sign off on a guest researcher pass. I spent weeks in the airy college library, combing through files, books, old clippings, and reports. I relentlessly chased after Easy and Ntobeko, with varying degrees of success, as they both tried politely to avoid me.

After a few months of research, I was convinced that I’d stumbled upon a story that needed telling—or, perhaps more honestly, that I desperately needed to tell. Amy was my entrée into this strange world. She had come here with purpose, just twenty-five years old when she left home, and she had tried her best to understand a pulsing South Africa in the midst of revolution. She had died in her quest. I had come here without any such noble purpose, thirty years old, and now I, too, wanted to understand a new South Africa.

The men I would be writing about were the ultimate “other”: poor, black, South African men, convicted murderers, reformed radicals living in a sort of modern wasteland, at once nursing the wounds of apartheid and—if you believed the “Africa Rising” magazine covers that hit the stands annually, emblazoned with the acacia tree set against an incandescent setting sun—heading toward a brighter future. The men had grown up with little education in an urban tribal culture that placed abiding value on ancient Xhosa traditions. And they now lived in this new rainbow nation, that enduring nickname given to post-apartheid South Africa by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was trying to celebrate the country’s racial and cultural mishmash. I hoped that in understanding these men, I could understand how a country broken apart by a system of colonization, segregation, and dehumanization could heal, reconcile, and move forward. This small, fierce story would tell the larger story of the New South Africa, and of the redemptive power of forgiveness in the face of tragedy.

But you won’t read about that here. That old narrative, the one I was following as I began my research, fell ill early on and perished about a year in. In its stead, a different story emerged.

When I started my work, I didn’t understand the complexities of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or of South Africa, or, I suppose, of true-life stories in general. I assumed there were clear-cut narratives in the country, with good and bad protagonists and antagonists, and that I would simply tell one of them. But as the Johannesburg-born journalist Rian Malan wrote, “In South Africa, it’s like a law of nature: there’s no such thing as a true story here. The facts might be correct, but the truth they embody is always a lie to someone else ... Atop of all this, we live in a country where mutually annihilating truths coexist amicably. We are a light unto nations. We are an abject failure. We are progressing every day as we hurtle backward.”

Early on, I became convinced, naively, that with enough frenzied effort, I could find the Big Truth about the Amy Biehl story. I was after the objective truth: that elusive creature, a forensic reality that conformed to proven or provable facts, something mathematical and scientific and doubtless. But Easy, the man who over the years brought me closest to this truth and led me farthest from it, broke it down for me.

We were sitting across from each other at a linoleum table at the Hungry Lion fast food establishment in downtown Cape Town. Easy was wearing his buttercup-yellow Paul Smith polo,

which he bought from a Nigerian who dealt in cut-rate fine garments, which were either stolen or counterfeit, it was hard to tell. He was drinking a ginger soda and I was spitting questions at him.

Months earlier, Easy had christened me Nomzamo, a Xhosa name. All Xhosa names have literal meanings that are reflections of a person's character or the hopes of the parent for the child. Nomzamo comes from the Xhosa word *zama*, "to try." It can be interpreted as "she who strives and perseveres" or, probably, in my case, "pain in the ass." Easy had explained it as: "You always try, try, try. It's a good name."

"What do you really want to know?" he finally asked, looking at me with a mixture of compassion and bewilderment. He was wiping the grease from his fingers onto a paper napkin.

"I want to know the truth!" I exclaimed.

Easy studied me for a moment and then broke into guttural laughter.

"Nomzamo, Nomzamo, Nomzamo," he said. "The truth is not anymore existing for years and years."

4.

He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster.
—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

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