



Mike Nicol

A sort of civil war

For weeks I procrastinated about writing this essay on violence. To be honest as the deadline got closer the more I realised I didn't want to write it. I didn't want to immerse myself in the litany of perversity that currently invests the dark side of the South African soul. Although violence has been a constant subject of my novels, although it has been a theme in the books of non-fiction that I have written, suddenly I no longer had the heart for another tour of Hell. But for weeks I pretended that I was putting off the inevitable because of pressure of other work. Dutifully I collected a thick wad of newspaper clippings on various aspects of the topic and jotted down odd thoughts and notes. They at least provided an illusion of my intention to write the piece. Then I did what I have never done before, I asked for an extension of the deadline. Finally, a day before the deadline, when I could delay no longer I looked to Dante and reread those dreadful words from the Inferno: 'Abandon hope, all ye who enter here'.

This sounds melodramatic but consider: during that week a car bomb went off in the centre of my home town, Cape Town, in the afternoon rush hour and the fact that no one was killed can only be ascribed to good fortune. This was the nineteenth car bomb in two years, and the third one that month. The last bomb had exploded outside a night club, prior to that had been a midday detonation at an up-market shopping mall. Also the week ended with the sentencing of four murderers for a gruesome killing. The scenes that erupted in court as the sentences were handed down revealed such schisms and moral faultlines in society that I for one was left stunned. But this issue belongs to a lower level of hell, there are other levels that need to be negotiated first.

And so, as a way in, these extracts are from my notes collected over the last four weeks:

1) 'Kevin (a white friend who lives in Johannesburg) telephoned to tell me that when he arrived home last night he carried documents from his car to the front door, put the documents on the hall table, turned to close the front door and found a black man crouching on the steps aiming a gun at his head. Fear, adrenalin, presence of mind, call it what you will, some survival instinct made him slam shut the front door and lock the bolt before the gunman could react. But the experience left him shaking and he has felt jittery all day.'

(I have decided to colour-code people in this article because in various ways this shows how those sectors of society most brutalised by apartheid and centuries of colonialism are now being traumatised by a new wave of violence that seems almost suicidal in its intensity. At the same time while much of this moral dysfunction can be ascribed to the inequities of the past this dangerously diminishes the level of the individual's culpability. Somewhere in this murkiness people must still be held accountable for what they do.)

2) 'My step-daughter, told me this evening when she called that while she was driving in a traffic jam a movement made her look into the car alongside where the white driver was leering at her and masturbating.'

3) 'Paul, mid-twenties, white, described to me over lunch how he was carjacked last year and driven to a deserted dirt road outside Durban where the black hijackers made him lie face down on the side of the road. They put a gun to the back of his head and he thought they were going to shoot him assassination-style. For some reason they didn't, but drove away laughing.'

This is what it means to live here now. I'm sure that most of my white middle class friends can tell stories like these, yet we belong to the group least affected by violence. Those of my friends who live in Cape Town – the city that has become the most violent in the country when it comes to murder, attempted murder, rape, assault, and robbery with assault – would, statistically, have to be extremely unlucky to come up against the thugs who inhabit these categories. Even the most casual observer of violent trends in Cape Town would very soon realize that violent crime is far more prevalent in the POVERTY-STRICKEN black and coloured townships than in the white suburbs. And now an official report has confirmed this street and dinner-table talk and added some extra details to justify the money spent on collating the obvious. Thus we learn that violent crimes vary between neighbourhoods. **THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND THIS VARIANCE IS NOT EXPLAINED BUT THE DIFFERENCES DO SHOW THE DYNAMICS AT WORK IN THE COMMUNITIES.** So, the black township of Khayelitsha, for example, has lower rates of drug related crimes but 'much higher rates of robbery with a firearm and of reported rapes,' than, say, the coloured areas of Bishop Lavis or Elsie's River where drugs are a big number. While in the black township of Guguletu guns feature prominently in instances of murder, attempted murder, assault, and rape. In the white areas – and middle class coloured suburbs like Athlone – theft and burglary are high on the crime list but violent crimes are statistically much lower.

'The most important contributor to the fear and paranoia about crime is violent crime,' those who compiled the report conclude somewhat self-evidently. But, they point out, the reality is that the majority of murder victims are young men in the age group eighteen to twenty-nine. More specifically one of the compilers told me it's a matter of 'young black guys killing young black guys. There's nothing here that doesn't look like the inner cities of Brazil or the United States for that matter.'

Alcohol abuse, too, is usually to be found wherever violence erupts be this at bars, shebeens or in the family home. Studies by the Medical Research Council show that seventy percent of victims of violence who end up in Cape Town's hospitals have 'high blood alcohol levels'. In the black and coloured areas of the city 'almost one hundred percent' of serious assaults is associated with alcohol. Also, I was told, 'in a very high percentage of cases the offender is known to the victim, being either a family member or an acquaintance. It is important to understand that most violent crime is not "stranger crime" where an unknown person breaks into your home and attacks you, or hijacks you in your car. In particular domestic violence and murder are endemic, and very often involve the use of a gun by the woman's partner.' The report refers to the 'toxic environment' that is the background to the lives of so many young black and coloured children. 'You take a child growing up in a chaotic violent household, who also experiences this violence and chaos out on the street and at school,' it was pointed out to me, 'and by the time that kid is six years old he

has a map of the world that says he has to look out for himself by being suspicious of everyone and hyper aggressive.' A significant pointer here is the use of the male pronoun. Most, if not all, of the aggressors are men. Unfortunately what they do is often condoned by their womenfolk, many of whom must know or suspect their husbands, boyfriends, fathers, brothers, and uncles of the heinous crimes that have created our toxic environment.

A description of this toxic environment would go something like this:

- 1) An eighteen-year-old coloured man is shot dead in an apparent gang-related attack while talking to a friend near a mini-market in Woodlands, Mitchells Plain.
- 2) The Reserve Bank Governor, Tito Mboweni, is robbed at a garage shop in Johannesburg by armed black robbers, who take his cell phone.
- 3) After a drinking session the white owner of a construction company, Pieter Odendaal, allegedly kills his black employee, Mosoko Rampuru, by dragging him behind his van.
- 4) A black nine-year-old Klipspruit, Soweto boy sodomised over four years by at least ten of his adult neighbours is in counselling in a children's home after allegedly sodomising his younger brothers, the eldest of whom is three years old.
- 5) An eighteen year old black student, Elie Ntjana, of Jeppe (a Johannesburg suburb) is convicted of cruelty to animals and bestiality after killing a cat and trying to have intercourse with it.
- 6) A black pensioner and a black security guard are shot dead and two black robbers critically injured during an attempted cash heist at a pension pay station in the Northern Province when six men open fire on a cash in transit van.
- 7) A twenty-one year old white woman is hijacked and then raped while travelling near Kempton Park, Gauteng. The woman is driving with a white male friend when four black men jump onto the road and block their way. The men hold the couple at gunpoint and take turns raping the woman. They take her jewellery and cell phone before driving off in her car.
- 8) Thirty-five year old coloured drug lord, Allan Meyer, is shot dead in the driveway of his home in Belgravia Estate, Athlone by a man armed with an AK-47.
- 9) A Free State court is told by two black electrical engineers how white farmer, Chris van Zyl, 'pulled off our clothes, tied us up with rope, then said: "I will show you how I kill kaffirs."' He fired shots between their legs, kicked them in the groin, ribs, and kidneys, and dragged one of the men behind his motorbike.
- 10) Northern Province police arrest five sangomas (herbal doctors) in as many months for sexually assaulting teenagers and forcing female clients to submit to sex to be cured of their illnesses. One of the sangomas chained a teenager to his bed and repeatedly raped her over a twenty-four hour period.
- 11) On National Woman's Day at least nine incidents of rape are reported to police including the rape of a black sixteen-year-old, and the gang-rape of a

black nineteen-year-old by three black men.

12) Summing up a week of extraordinary depravity in August, a cartoon in the newspaper, *The Mail & Guardian*, shows South Africa on a psychiatrist's couch undergoing therapy. South Africa says, 'How was my week? Well, I had sex with a goat, sold my kids as sex slaves (except the incest babies I'd already killed), I wallowed in child porn, and I'm still regularly raping little girls as a cure for AIDS...'

Such a list could go on and on. These incidents, however, were clipped from four newspapers: two editions of the *Cape Times* and two editions of the *Mail & Guardian* that were published during July and August 2000. They were not the only stories dealing with issues of violence in the respective newspapers but they serve to give some idea of the toxic environment. As does this summary (from my notes) of violent deaths reported one Monday on SAfm, a national radio station: 'The first news bulletin of the day reported five deaths by violence: a robbery in which a Chinese mother and her daughter were stabbed to death in their upmarket Sandton jewellery shop; a farm attack that left one of the black perpetrators dead and their elderly white victims in a serious condition in hospital; the assassination of a black politician in KwaZulu/Natal; and the discovery outside Soweto of an unidentified black male body with a bullet hole in the head. The second news bulletin an hour later added to these the murder of a nine-year-old girl from the ironically named coloured township of Happy Valley, near Cape Town. She was the seventh girl to have been raped and murdered in the coloured areas of greater Cape Town over the last four weeks. On the news bulletin at nine am it was reported that nineteen people had been murdered in the Pretoria area over the weekend. The second item on that bulletin previewed a court case scheduled to start in the Cape Town high court that morning. This concerned the rape, sodomising and brutal assault of fourteen-year-old, Valencia Farmer, by four young – one was fifteen years old – coloured gangsters in July 1999. After the gang rape she was stabbed fifty-three times in what can only be described as a bloodlust frenzy and her throat was slit. Miraculously she lived for a further two days and was able to give police the names of two of her attackers. In the terminology of the rainbow nation, Valencia Farmer was coloured.' An evening news bulletin on the same day reported the discovery of a white family killing in a suburb of Port Elizabeth. A man had shot his two children, his wife and himself. Listeners were next told that at a Cape Town suburban railway station a white man, proclaiming himself 'the son of God' had gone berserk and stabbed five people on the basis that 'all those who have sinned must die.' His rampage was finally stopped when police shot him. Even then they had to pump seven bullets into him before he collapsed. The following item was about a twenty-year-old black youth from Soshanguve, a township near Pretoria, who shot dead his girlfriend and a schoolteacher because he thought they were having an affair.

Given this information during the course of a day it is not difficult to understand why there is fear and paranoia about violent crime. Nor is it difficult to gauge the pervasiveness of the toxic environment. Clearly life is cheap, as cheap as it is in times of war. Individuals are abused and discarded without any moral conscience let alone any regard for the law. And if the violence were not serious enough it is the extreme casualness of those who rape, assault and kill that is almost more alarming than the deeds they commit. Worse still is the extreme casualness with which society has come to tolerate violence. For example, a survey that canvassed over twenty-six thousand teenagers and thousands of adult men and women in black squatter

communities and townships to the south of Johannesburg found that eight out of ten young men believed women were responsible or partly responsible for causing sexual violence; five out of ten young women were also of this opinion; and five out of ten young males and females believed that forcing sex with someone known to them did not constitute sexual violence. A survey fieldworker who attended the sentencing of ten black men convicted of gang-raping a thirteen-year-old black girl reported that the parents of the rapists believed the girl was responsible for the rape.

This kind of distortion in the moral fabric of many sectors of society was foregrounded startlingly by the trial of four young men accused of murdering two young people, and the attempted murder of their friend on a scenic pass in the Cape winelands in July 1999. Although the victims were white and the perpetrators were coloured the killing can not be read as a racist event. (In fact with the exception of white farmer/employer assaults on black labourers and the attacks on white farmers by black assailants racist motives cannot be attributed to most crime.) The attack on the pass was a random opportunistic event. Random in the sense that the killers had already decided to murder and rob the first people they encountered. In their language, 'to kill any bait.'

What happened was that late on a clear winter afternoon, twenty-one-year-old Marisa du Toit, twenty-five-year-old Dorian van Rensburg, and twenty-one-year-old Audrey Myburg drove up the pass to enjoy the view at sunset over the Franschoek valley. They stopped at a look-out point, got out of their car and were relaxing in the beauty of the moment when eighteen-year-old Heinrico Pietersen, twenty-three-year-old Morne Lakay, twenty-three-year-old Dawid Williams and twenty-seven-year-old Jehan Abrahams drove up. Lakay sprang from the car and fired a shot into the air.

At the trial, Audrey Myburg told how she 'turned and there was a man with a gun and the barrel was still smoking. He was holding it towards us. He and the others ordered us to sit against the wall and empty our pockets. We obeyed them and handed over money, jewellery and bank cards. They asked us for the pin numbers for the bank cards and then told us to stand up and jump off the side of the mountain. Once again we obeyed them and climbed onto the parapet wall. At that moment Dorian was shot dead. Marisa started crying and I tried to comfort her. They ordered us to pick up Dorian's body and throw it over the wall. It was too heavy. They had to help us. We were then ordered to jump. We understood that we would jump to our deaths. We jumped and I landed on a ledge while Marisa started sliding and grabbed onto a branch dangling over a ravine. Pietersen then came down and again asked me for my pin number. I told him the number but he said I was lying. I then asked him if I could help my friend but he wouldn't let me. Marisa said to me, "It doesn't matter what you say. He's going to shoot us anyway." Then he shot me in my hip. I blacked out for about five seconds and when I came around I was sliding down the mountain. I heard Marisa screaming and another shot. I heard her body falling. I pretended I was dead so these people would leave me alone. I heard cars driving off. I managed to climb back to the top.' What Audrey Myburg didn't know as she lay there pretending to be dead was that Jehan Abrahams had started climbing down to her intent on cutting off her head. He only turned back when Dawid Williams called out that they had to get away fast. Evidence was also heard of how the four then picked up their girlfriends and gave them their victims' sunglasses, jewellery and watches as presents. Clearly the crime did not cause the four killers any pangs of conscience. Nor did they show remorse at the trial.

When sentence was delivered the court was packed with the families and friends of both the perpetrators and the victims. Justice Deon van Zyl described the men as 'inhumane, cruel and evil' murderers who 'did not show the least interest in the consequences of their actions.' This caused a murmur of disapproval from the public benches. But when the judge handed down double life sentences for the murders and attempted murder plus fifteen years for robbery to each of the accused, the court erupted in screams and shouts of abuse. 'He didn't shoot. He didn't murder anyone,' wailed Jehan Abraham's sister. 'Racist,' shouted Lakay's girlfriend. 'You wouldn't have been so hard if it weren't white people that were killed.' Such was the commotion that the orderlies gave up any attempts at restoring order, but tried to clear the court. Through it all the judge calmly continued passing sentence although no one could hear him, and the families of the victims, dodging blows and abuse, were escorted in tears from the court to a back exit. Outside in the street the fracas continued. A newspaper photographer was punched by an angry supporter of the murderers and his camera smashed. Pietersen's mother, Naomi, collapsed sobbing. Once the crowd had dispersed and the emotion had subsided Lakay's mother, Helen, told reporters her son was a Godfearing lad who 'tried to steal my heart by bringing me flowers,' and served holy communion in the local church. Williams' uncle, the Reverend Adrian Green, added that his nephew was a long-standing church member who had 'slipped up during a moment of weakness.' He felt that the rights of the guilty had not been taken into account. He did not elaborate on what he thought these rights could be.

There are a number of issues highlighted by the reaction to this trial: firstly, as part of a 'get tough on crime' response from government, judges have been told to hand down 'no-nonsense' sentences in cases such as this where the culpability is beyond any doubt. Secondly, while most judges are white males, and while sometimes racism can be said to have motivated their sentences, in this instance the allegations are spurious. Given the calls to bring back the death penalty which the coloured community has voiced when commenting on the Valencia Farmer case, and the incidences where young girls are abducted, raped and murdered, it is quite likely that the same calls would have been made in this case had the murdered been coloured. But what appalled me most about the Franschoek killings was the families' inability to see the evilness of the killers' actions. In the Reverend Green's words and implications, the wayward boys had 'slipped up during a moment of weakness.' Such an explanation totally negated the horror of what they had done. It did not account for their decision to kill any 'bait.' It did not account for the cold-bloodedness of the way they killed. It did not account for Jehan Abrahams wanting to cut off Audrey Myburg's head. Nor did it deal with their callousness after the event. Essentially what the Reverend Green was inadvertently pointing at was the collapse of a moral life: here were professedly religious people who supported their church, worshipped in a faith that stressed ideas about right and wrong, good and evil, yet who could not apply these tenets to the way they lived. Quite clearly we were being told that the violence was not only a factor of a toxic environment but also an expression of a greater malaise.

A malaise that can be charted through many other incidences of violence I have not dwelt on. Here, for example, could be cited the Cape Town 'taxi wars' that in the last five months have claimed the lives of seven bus drivers, three commuters and wounded almost thirty bus passengers. The war is between the minibus taxi operators who shuttle commuters from the townships to the city, and the bus company, Golden Arrow, which performs the same function. For reasons of economy of scale the bus fare is cheaper than prices charged by taxi

operators. Aggrieved by this circumstances the taxi operators hired a hitman – a former Umkhonto weSizwe soldier – to shoot at the bus drivers. Wars between the various taxi companies and between the taxis and the mass transport companies have been a murderous feature of this industry nationally for the last twenty years.

Among other examples of insidious violence could be cited the vigilante groups that are a feature of many townships where police failure to deal with crime has forced people to take the law into their own hands. Similarly there are reports of corruption within the police force that have lead to collusion with gangsters and taxi warlords, let alone other forms of criminal conduct which continually undermine efforts at crime prevention.

On top of this has come a decision by the Commissioner of Police, Jackie Selebi, not to release certain crime statistics and to fire those police officers who communicate with the media. Obviously the Ministry for Safety and Security is concerned about the way violence is tarnishing South Africa's image abroad. But as one commentator has pointed out limiting the media's access to government information 'on one of the most important issues facing the nation' has serious implications for the country's international profile, especially as the region has recently been stigmatised by press abuses in Zimbabwe. Rather obviously, the blank out on crime statistics has lead to the popular perception that violent crime is a far more serious problem than most people thought. Given the daily bombardment of atrocities reported by the radio, television and the newspapers it is difficult coming to any other conclusion than that the country is in the throes of a war. A sort of civil war. There are no battles, just isolated incidents – murders, rapes, plundering, assassinations (of gangsters, warlords, politicians, and magistrates), bomb blasts, and the random shooting of commuters. there is very little sense in any of it. no one claims responsibility for the urban terror, or even tries to propagate a cause. at the end of each the country is left to tally up the dead and the maimed and to wonder what desperation clutches at the national heart.

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