

Outside by Basil Porter

When I was four years old my family moved to a new house in Johannesburg, a serious upgrading, probably related to my father's arrival at a higher place in the socio-economic structure of white, Jewish, upward-moving society among Johannesburg's northern suburbs' residents. The suburb was Lower Houghton, reflecting the desire of the residents to hold on to their colonial British roots. The six-roomed, double-story house sat on more than an acre of land, together with a swimming pool, a tennis court, and an empty lot behind the tennis court adjoining the tenth hole of the local golf course. My memories of the house are quite vivid, and start at age four or five years, continuing till age twenty-three, when I left the house, the suburb, the city and the country after completing medical school and making Aliyah to Israel

As this was my first environment to grow up in from a tender age, I never saw anything particularly unique about it. As most of my friends lived in similar style, with some variation regarding swimming-pools or tennis courts, but all the houses being large and situated on very large pieces of land, it was natural that I would assume that most of the world lived that way. My closest friend lived a ten- minute walk away in a house with even more rooms, including one with a billiard table, and a huge covered area next to their swimming pool with a barbeque area (known in local slang as the "braai" area). The roof of their house was flat, with numerous jutting up protrusions, a paradise for our rich imaginary games as spacemen and supermen. Another friend lived one street further away, in a strange single story abode with long dark corridors, and a series of three garden areas, each on a different ground level, stretching down to a tennis court, and allowing for games of cricket, soccer or croquet to be played simultaneously.

Life after school or on weekends revolved around where swimming or sports would take place. Each house, depending on the parents who lived there, supplied different treats which would be offered during a break from our imaginary games or sporting activity. Chocolate biscuits, biltong and Coke were the norm of the supplementary diet. The only exposure to people living in apartments that I can remember, was the compulsory visits with my parents to my grandparents, who lived in the "other" areas where Jews lived, Hillbrow and Berea, where the masses of apartment buildings mingled with shops of every description, a strange separate existence from my suburban bubble. Only years later would I learn that the residences of the grandparents and other Jews of my age that I met through the youth movement activity, reflected the earlier period of the wanderings of Lithuanian Jewry in South Africa. Many of the parents and grandparents of my friends had started their lives in small towns, working their way up the social ladder through jobs as travelling salesmen or store owners. Those who succeeded with their business brains, or who managed to reach university, had been able to move to the big city suburbs and establish environments for their families such as the one I grew up in.

The huge spaces outside the houses offered many opportunities for exploration, in addition to the sports and swimming activities in the immaculately maintained grounds. Every house had a back entrance, the one a visitor or even the owners of the houses seldom entered or exited from. Opening the back door involved stepping into another world, the place where the people who cared for the well-off Jews worked and slept, not to be seen except when making the beds, cutting the grass, cleaning the swimming -pool or cooking and serving the meals. This back yard in my home could be reached through a number of doors. One opened

from the kitchen, one opened from the small “back garden”, one opened from the closed garage where the two cars were parked, and another door opened from a side path next to the house, directly on to the living quarters of the black servants. In contrast to the front area, where the entrance to the property and parking area were paved to allow the smooth entrance of the ubiquitous cars, this path was unpaved, a reminder to the servants that they still lived in an undeveloped area, an area where the white house owners never treaded.

The kitchen door allowed direct access to a small, red stone paved area leading from the kitchen to their rooms. Three tiny bedrooms next to a narrow corridor allowed each servant to sleep in a single bed, perhaps with a small table and a few drawers. In another corner around the paved area was the tiny space allocated for a shower and a single toilet. The staff could use their few hours of leisure after serving lunch for taking their food outside to the small back garden, and possibly catch a short nap before starting to prepare the evening meal for the family. If a visitor (a spouse, a friend or even a child) arrived, they would be entertained on the grass outside, or often on the sidewalk outside the house. In bad weather, the only possibility was to sit on the bed in one of the tiny bedrooms.

My main memory of this part of the house is a mélange of smells- the polish used to clean the red tiled floor, the soapy smell of laundry detergent and the overriding smell of urine wafting from the tiny communal toilet. An unforgettable smell in my long-term memory is the smell of skokiaan, a potent alcoholic beverage prepared illegally by blacks, who were not allowed to purchase alcoholic beverages under apartheid laws. I remember at a very young age following the potent smell to the back stoep next to the servants’ quarters one Sunday afternoon, and encountering a group of police standing next to the three servants who attended to my family’s daily needs, and seeing them being led off to the police van after they had disposed of a laundry tub loaded with freshly made skokiaan. My parents offered little explanation, and the servants returned only some months later from their rapidly executed trials and inevitable jail sentences. I think this was one of the few times I ever saw my parents in the tiny back area of the house, where the picture of apartheid was ever present, as in every house in Lower Houghton and throughout white South Africa in my formative years.

Our luxurious house offered me an additional territory of my own. The area below the tennis court and adjoining the golf course consisted entirely of wild uncut grass and a few old, tall eucalyptus trees. No one entered this area, which served no purpose and therefore did not warrant even minimal treatment from the gardener. But to a boy of seven through seventeen years, this area offered an escape from the clean monitored existence above. I could play with friends among the knee- high grass, some fallen trees and an abandoned old water filtration tank from swimming pool, which provided a perfect environment for us to create endless adventures of crime and romance. This was also where I would escape to enjoy the cigarettes snatched from my father’s or mother’s reserves of tobacco, while sitting on a bed of grass, leaning against a majestic tree, and reflecting on my life.

Time passed, and as I progressed through childhood and puberty, modernization of the area proceeded apace. One day my father announced at the evening meal that the bottom lot of the house, my area of play, had been “expropriated” as part of the route of a highway that was to be built. The word was new to me, but the smile on my father’s face that night indicated that it was a bonanza for him, allowing him to be relieved of this piece of useless land, as well as offering a significant financial perk. Years passed and both the adjoining

piece of golf course and the bottom lot of the house disappeared, as the pride of Johannesburg, the new M1 north-south highway appeared.

Years later, following my move to Israel, my living quarters were condensed into a tiny single room with a basin with cold water, in an ex- army barracks built by the British at Tel Hashomer hospital, and now used as bachelor quarters for single workers at the hospital, including newly arrived interns from South Africa, such as yours truly. On returning to Johannesburg many years later after my parents had moved on, I drove along Central Street, Lower Houghton hoping to see the house and revive memories of growing up in an environment of luxury and privilege. But hopes of seeing the short, steep drive leading down to the house and the high, hedge sheltering the home from view were short-lived. The area was flat, now with a modern office block adjoining the road. No eucalyptus tree or other familiar landmark allowed me to connect to my growing-up in a home cut off from apartheid reality, many years before. A whole world had vanished

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