

The First Two Pages of “In a Land of Fear and Denial” by Lisa de Nikolits

From the Mesdames of Mayhem’s *In The Spirit of 13*
edited by Donna Carrick (Carrick Publishing)

An Essay by Lisa de Nikolits

I must admit, I don’t like telling people I’m from South Africa! The stain of apartheid is like Lady Macbeth’s “damned spot”—there’s no removing the eternal shame of being born a white South African. “But,” the argument goes, “you were a child at the time, what could you have done?” Even as a child, I knew how disturbingly wrong it all was, and I also knew that the situation was temporary, that the land would go back to the Africans. Even as a child, I felt like a tourist in my own home. I was born there but “it”—South Africa, as it was—could not, would not, and most certainly should not sustain.

We write to untangle the sins of our past. We write to try to make sense of the unthinkable. And we write so that long-gone heroes are remembered and their legacy preserved.

The South Africa of today is a very different one, and I haven’t been back in many years because my family now reside in Australia. I miss South Africa so much! That’s another reason to write about a thing: because you miss it and writing about it allows you to spend some time in a place you’d like to be.

I wrote “In a Land of Fear and Denial” for the Mesdames of Mayhem’s fifth anthology, *In the Spirit of 13*, for all the above reasons.

Of course, I didn't want to be obvious about any of it, I wanted these things to flow naturally in the story.

Firstly, there was the language. I was concerned people wouldn't understand the South African colloquialisms, but it was equally important that the voice was correct. Working with publisher, author, and editor, Donna Carrick, we made sure that readers fully understood what was being said, without any intrusive explanations or padding.

The second thing was the setting and the details of the time. I tried to invoke this with the meals, the décor, using small details of their lives to paint a picture and create a cinematic experience. It was also important to convey a certain time—the story is set in the late '70s, early '80s, and I wanted that to be apparent and relatable.

I think the most important aspect for me was the relatability. I wanted readers to be able to relate to the characters, the time, and the place.

Apartheid South Africa has received literary attention recently; Damon Galgut's *The Promise* won the 2021 Booker Prize, and Toronto-based, South African-born Dawn Promislow published her book, *Wan* (Freehand Books). Of the two, I most highly recommend Promislow's book—it's exquisitely written and is a compelling read.

I wanted to write this story for a long time, but I had no idea how to go about

it. When the theme for *In the Spirit of 13* was announced, I was determined that the time had come. I was going to write this story, no matter how difficult it was.

I knew the tokoloshe (an evil African spirit who enters your orifice and devours your body and spirit) was a good springboard, and I also knew it would be a great metaphor for the evil of apartheid. The trick was to use the tokoloshe in a believable narrative and bring the two things together.

I think I succeeded—I hope I succeeded! I love Tracey, the young protagonist, very much. In fact, I love all the characters and truly feel they are representative of life as it was then.

We hope to exorcise the ghosts of the past by writing about them, and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't and we have to keep trying. But perhaps, like Lady Macbeth's stain, some ghosts are not meant to be banished.

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What are you most afraid of?

I stared out the window, chewing on my Bic pen. The plastic orange end was splintered and I nibbled on the frayed spikes, knowing I'd be in trouble if Mom saw me. “Ruining your teeth,” she'd say. “There's no money to fix them either. Come on Tracey girl, you know better than that.” She was right, I did.

I stared at the see-through piggy bank that Dad had got me, wondering if I should raid it for a soft-serve from the shop up the street. I could see the coins piled up behind the blue Standard Bank logo and I was annoyed that I'd have to break it to get the money because that would make Dad mad which was never a good idea. Dad only got the piggy bank because he was friends with the bank

manager which was how he managed to pay my school fees at the convent for a little while longer.

“Every term I can keep you in a private school is a good step in your education,” he’d say, without fail, every time a payment was due.

“Ja well, God knows why you’re so hung up on that stupid school,” Doryce retorted with equal consistency. Dorrie is my big sister. She’s fourteen and she got expelled from the convent. Man, was Dad ever angry about that. I thought he was going to hit her but he punched the wall instead and Mom had to hang a picture over the hole because he refused to fix it.

My sister got expelled because she refused to confess the right sins to the priest so he made her leave the confessional unabsolved which was historical. Then she got into an argument with the headmistress, Sister Colmcille, about her religious rights, and next thing, she was booted out for unladylike conduct.

She didn’t care, she got what she wanted. She went to Randpark High, a government school with boys and girls. There was something wild and casual about a government school and I was happy to stay in the safe haven of the convent. I was in Standard Four with one year left in Junior School and Dorrie was in Standard Seven in High School.

Dorrie was a rebel, everybody said so. She was always talking about how apartheid was disgusting and wrong and that we should all be protesting about it. She was constantly making cups of tea for our maid, Anna, which Dad said just confused everybody and we all knew Anna had her own cups to drink from and never mind that, she had her own tea too and Dorrie really should leave well enough alone.

“I hear you’ve been at it again,” Dad said to Dorrie when we sat down for supper. I’d finished my homework and I lied, saying I was most afraid of getting struck by lightning. It sounded good anyway.

Dad and Dorrie were headed for an argument. I could feel it, just like when the sky closes in with big fat dark clouds and you know a bad storm is coming. I was hoping their argument would stop us from having to eat whatever concoction Mom had come up with for the night. Mom is a housewife and apart from making sure that Anna did her job and ironed Dad’s shirts with exactly the right folds, she didn’t have anything to do except drive us to school, tan by the swimming pool with Mrs. Fisher and find bizarre supper recipes for us.

“Looks great!” Auntie Sue enthused as Mom carried a casserole dish into the room.

Really? She hadn't even seen it! The smell filled the room, a weird combination of smelly socks and sour milk. Great. Of course Auntie Sue had to be nice about it, her husband had left her for his secretary and she had to come to live with us. She had no money, nothing. Mom had told me and Dorrie that Auntie Sue had been left high and dry and she said it showed you, putting all her eggs in one basket. And now that basket was living the high life with his secretary and Auntie Sue was here with us.

But Mom, I wanted to say, if you think about it, your eggs are all in one basket too. But Dad was different, he'd never leave us for his secretary. But what if he did? There you go, just another thing for me to have to worry about, as if I didn't have enough things. I thought back to my homework. What are you most afraid of? Honestly, what wasn't I afraid of? But the question was what was I the most afraid of and the answer to that was easy.

“Doryce my girl, there's nothing we can do about it,” Dad said but I could tell his heart wasn't in the discussion. He looked pale and tired and there were big bags under his eyes. It was the first time my Dad looked old to me and it made me afraid. I wanted to ask him if he was okay, bring up the big topic but Mom had said we weren't to talk about it anymore

“It was a terrible thing but what's done is done, now we get on with life,” she said.

Maybe Dad wasn't stressed by what had happened but by my school fees? Maybe the bank manager wasn't his friend any more? I didn't want to go to Randpark High with the boys.

“The laws are the laws,” Dad continued. “We don't make them and if we break them, we'll be arrested and then where will we be? They'll send us to Robben Island, that's where. And stop telling Anna she should protest. You're putting her in danger. Seriously Dorrie, I mean it, my girl, stop already. We give her a nice room, a good home and money I can't even afford. Money she needs to send back to her family in Bophuthatswana. If you get Anna mixed up in any nonsense, she'll get arrested and we'll never see her again. Is that what you want?”

Dorrie set her mouth in that stubborn line I knew all too well. “It's wrong,” she said.

“Dorrie,” I said and my voice was tiny, “we have to look after Anna. You can’t do anything that will send her to Robben Island.” I stared at my plate of chicken with Swiss cheese, almonds and sour cream. It was terrible and I poked at it with my fork, wishing it would disappear. “I don’t want to go to Robben Island either.”

My mother sighed. “I’m fed up with you people. I try so hard to come up with these suppers and all you do is argue and there’s no appreciation for my efforts.”

“I’m sorry Mom,” Dorrie was contrite. Mom was the only one who could calm Dorrie down, get her back on track. “This is delicious. The basil is a very nice touch.” She gamely shovelled in a mouthful. “But,” she continued, chewing with her mouth open, “I’ll tell you this much, it wasn’t Black people who attacked the Bezuidenhouts.”

Oh my lord. She had brought up the forbidden topic.

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Originally from South Africa, Lisa de Nikolits is the award-winning author of eleven published novels. She has appeared on recommended reading lists for Open Book Toronto, 49th Shelf, *Chatelaine*, *Canadian Living*, *Hello! Canada*, the *Quill & Quire*, and most recently, the CBC’s 65 works of Canadian fiction to watch for in fall 2022. *The Occult Persuasion* and *The Anarchist’s Solution* was longlisted for a Sunburst Award for Excellence in Canadian Literature of The Fantastic and *The Rage Room* was a finalist in the International Book Awards, 2021. *Everything You Dream is Real* is a sequel to *The Rage Room* or read it as a standalone. *No Fury Like That* was published in Italian in 2019 by Edizione Le Assassine under the title *Una furia dell’altro mondo*. Her short fiction and poetry have also been published in various international anthologies and journals. She is a member of the Mesdames of Mayhem, and the Sisters in Crime. Originally from South Africa, Lisa de Nikolits came to Canada in 2000. She lives and writes in Toronto.