ENTERTEXT

Letter to Motherwell

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Abstract

‘“Letter to Motherwell” was written during and after a ten-month stay in Port Elizabeth, South Africa in 2007. It is a personal memoir, a diary of impressions, and also an attempt to make sense of a wonderful but very challenging experience. Andrea Levy’s novels are about women in extraordinary and ordinary circumstances. They are women who have to do their best for themselves and their families even if their best is not ideal. Relocating to the intensity of South African society exposed many of the same dislocations of identity and culture which Andrea Levy’s characters experience and this is why I feel that these stories have a place amongst these papers examining her work.’

—Rhona Hammond

Letter to Motherwell

Rhona Hammond

Walking home from the supermarket with a bag full of bread and dry cleaning I thought about my children. I smiled to myself and remembered compliments received from passersby and daycare teachers. Then I looked up and caught sight of the newspaper advert on the lamppost. SHOCK CHILD RAPE FIGURES. A few metres down the road the next poster said something in Afrikaans about the South African cricket team. I was being reminded that I was in Port Elizabeth, where the security forces tortured Steve Biko and the main street is named after Govan Mbeki.

Tractorman waved as I walked to the daycare centre. He moved his big red tractor round in neat circles and trimmed the grass of the school playing fields. The sun beat down but he was wearing a woollen beanie hat. Wheelbarrowman had what looked like a t-shirt under his baseball cap to make something like a foreign legionnaire's cap and he waved too. I had given them these names because we saw them every time I collected Mhairi from school. Tractorman was my favourite because he had responded the first time we waved hello to him. I had picked him out because he had a red tractor and I said to Mhairi, 'Look! It's Tractorman. He has a tractor just like Grandad's.'

The hill was not very steep but the casuarina needles made it a bit slippy underfoot. Students drifted along on their way to the shopping centre for lunch or to catch a taxi. Some smiled, some didn't.

The big dogs threw themselves at the gate, as usual, then a couple of cars sped past, far too fast for the neighbourhood and I was glad once more that I didn't actually drive in this country because they all drove like maniacs. Unrestrained children bouncing around on seats and laps or even in the back of pickup trucks, utes, bakkies, whatever you call them. Those flatbed trucks which aren't as popular in the UK. Working cars, the border collies of the roads. On my right the yardman for the big white house washed a Toyota Corolla as if it were a Mercedes in the security cage built to protect it from the outside world. The newly spread asphalt was still very smooth and black and shiny. The midday heat was intense. Not far to go now.

It would be safer in a car. None of the other daycare mothers walked to collect their children. Mina, the maid who came with the apartment, had warned me never to talk on my phone in public, in fact, to switch it off so no one would know that I had one. She said it was sure to be stolen. In some ways I hoped that by being friendly to the gardeners and yardmen that I passed every day on my travels around the 4km square patch of PE that was my home they might help me if anything bad ever happened, if anyone ever tried to rob me. What did I mean 'tried'? It would be unlikely that they would fail, more just a question of the force that would be used and how well I would handle it. I was terrified it might happen when I was out with both girls.

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Everyone warned you, the fear of crime was all pervasive. TV and radio adverts offered you special windows for your car and steel doors for your house. I stopped listening to Algoa FM because in between the American R'n'B music the news bulletins were full of local court reports about brutal murders and rapes. In the shopping centre with the pram I would go to the toilets when I saw the security guards for the bank making cash deliveries because they had their hands on their machine pistols and I did not want to be caught in any cross fire.

The shopping centre security guards knew me because of the children. They held the keys to the baby change room. They wore burgundy jumpers with grey trousers and chatted to their friends by text message on their flashy mobile phones, looking up to say hello and smile at the baby. I wondered if they had children, where they lived, what they did after work, this boring, boring work wandering around a tiny shopping centre all day. Security guards at the shops, in cars driving round the suburb, at my husband's work. Security guards at the fun fair alongside the police who liked to gather in groups of four or five and chat. They were everywhere; so normal they didn't even stand out really. Even in London there hadn't been so many security guards, or did I just not notice them because I wasn't particularly concerned?

Sometimes at the shopping centre I would see the white woman with the little black girl in her pram. This mother was older than me, easily in her early forties, and her daughter was about the same age as Skye. She stood out because she had no nanny not because she was attractive and well dressed. I smiled and nodded at her as mothers do but I never actually spoke to her, even though I wanted a friend. It did not seem like the correct thing to do.

I asked Gladys, my babysitter, what she would be doing over the long weekend. Would she and her daughters do anything nice for the holiday? No, said Gladys. She would go to church on Saturday, because she was a Seventh Day Adventist, and if there wasn't a funeral to go to on Sunday she would just have a quiet day at home.

Gladys said that I had helped her a lot and that she had used her wages to buy a two burner stove, a bath tub, a new ironing board, some clothes and something to do with a tap which I didn't understand.

The weather turned into a southern hemisphere winter and it did become quite cold sometimes although the days were usually still sunny and bright. After the sun went down, the wind had a real bite to it and the apartment became cold. It was July now. Gladys told me that it was too cold in her house to stay up and that everyone went to bed at eight o'clock to stay warm.

Mhairi had fancy new slippers that we bought in Australia but when we were there I had just borrowed a pair from my mother-in-law because I had left my good slippers at home in Sweden. I was regretting this now as the wind blew through our beautiful but jerry-built apartment, rattling the thin windows which had let in a flood of rain in March. I figured that Gladys must be cold too as she took her boots off when she came into the house and put them back on before going home. I saw that the supermarket was selling

cheap slippers and I decided to act so one day I said to Gladys what size feet do you have because it's cold and I am going to get us some slippers. She laughed and said size five so Mhairi and I got dressed up to go outside in the cold wind. We walked up to the supermarket on a mission to buy slippers. I got a pink pair for Gladys and a purple pair for myself and I explained what we were doing to Mhairi. Thereafter, whenever she put her slippers on she would say 'just like Gladys'. Oh, I was so much happier with those slippers on.

One evening as we walked along the beach front with Mhairi's football the homeless lady who lived, sporadically, in the bus shelter beside the car park at the beach approached us. She made a fuss of Skye and Mhairi and told me that she had four daughters, two who are married and two who are not. I wanted to ask her why she had to live on the streets if there were four daughters who could help her but, of course, I didn't. She was painfully thin and walked with effort. Her face was sunken in from lack of teeth and flesh. That night her head was covered by a scarf and she was clutching a dirty cream coloured plastic bag. It looked as if it held some plastic plates. She said to me, 'Ma'am does live near here?' and I said yes and I felt my chest tighten because I was sure she was about to ask me for money and I didn't want to have to deal with that because I would have to say no. I never carried much money when I went to the beach with the children and I certainly never let anyone see where I kept it.

'Nex' time ma'am come here, can bring some food or some warm clothes? We sleeping here by the beach you see.'

I felt ashamed of what I had thought and I told her I would do what I could but the next night I was too busy getting the girls out the door and I forgot to grab any food for her. When I saw her I felt even more guilty. I broke my own rules and raked around in the backpack to find nine rand in change and a muesli bar which Mhairi saw me hand over and made a fuss about wanting. They have yoghourt on the top and she thinks they are chocolate bars. It was a poor kind of help. The following night I made a proper ham sandwich and packed it into a plastic bag with an apple. We walked south along the beachfront that night to watch the surfers who were out chasing big waves close to the shore. They moved in shifts between the water and their bakkies and Citi Golfs, the old men with long grey hair and paunches, the young men with short hair and muscles.

I analyse things too much. I found myself thinking that the apple was probably no use for her because of her teeth. I wondered if I should be helping one person instead of supporting some charity like the City Mission which would help many others. I had put a donation in the shopping trolley which was being used as a collection point at the entrance to the Pick'n'Pay supermarket, next to the collecting tin statue of the little girl with cerebral palsy (terrible palsy) which Mhairi loved to cuddle. She couldn't leave the supermarket without putting some coins in it.

For three more nights I took a sandwich and a piece of fruit in a plastic bag to the beach and twice I gave them to the homeless woman but on the third night she was not there. We walked our usual route and I was sure she would be at the bus shelter but she wasn't. I put the bag in the fridge when we got home and tried again the next night but

still no sign of her. I threw the sandwich out and put twenty rand in my pocket the next night but she wasn't there again so I gave up. Three days later we flew home to Sweden and I wondered if she was looking for us. I wondered where she had gone. When we got back from Sweden I half expected to see her again but we didn't. Instead I had a more typical encounter with a thin man called Joe who said he was from Durban and had no money because he had been robbed. I really didn't have anything I could give him that night. Mhairi was blowing bubbles into the wind beside the beach as I apologized but said I could not help him. He appealed to me as a Christian woman but I had to say firmly no, I'm sorry I can't help you. I really don't have anything I can give you.

My American friend Erin had told me about a volunteering opportunity in Central PE at a shelter for victims of domestic violence. I called the lady in charge and made plans to start once I got back from Sweden. I was going to teach the women who were on their way back into the world and the workforce how to use a computer. I planned it around Mhairi's daycare and Gladys coming to watch Skye and it felt good to be doing something responsible, something like work.

I had never driven in Central PE before but with the map and some meaningless directions about a hotel I didn't know, but was apparently supposed to know, I made it there on time. There was one student waiting and four others arrived over the next half hour. They were of differing levels of ability and one of them could probably have done the teaching herself if she had had the confidence but she seemed to be happy to go over things again. It turned out that I was only required for two weeks but I explained that I could do more and I felt, but didn't say, that more than two weeks was really needed. It is hard teaching something that comes as second nature to you because you forget all the little steps along the way and assume a lot of knowledge that does not exist. It was also difficult to build a sample spreadsheet to practice on. We were making up shopping lists and guessing rough prices and planning a party and organizing imaginary trucks leaving a factory. This all took up a lot of time.

The second week was less successful because it felt as though everyone's attention was somewhere else for some reason. The third class worked better and it seemed as though we had made real progress. One lady was late for class and apologized, explaining that they had found a woman's body in the alley behind her apartment block and the police wouldn't let any of the residents out that morning until they had spoken to them. I said oh dear and she added that she had asked a young man who lived on the bottom floor if he knew what had happened and he had said that the Nigerians had thrown her out of a window. I clearly didn't do a good job of keeping a poker face because she reassured me that she didn't believe everything he said.

On the fourth of October I went to Motherwell Township for the first time. I had promised Erin that I would follow up on the doors and other gifts that she gave the women who helped her research project and that I would take photos of the finished work and of the women themselves. Xoliswe the researcher organized this for me and Gladys was my guide into the township. We set off in my husband's silver VW Passat with Skye in her car seat (not happy about that) at nine o'clock after I had taken Mhairi to daycare. It

took us about half an hour to get to Gladys' house where I met her daughter, granddaughter and nephew. Little Lisa is two months younger than Skye and has benefited from the clothes that Skye has outgrown. She was wearing the pink and green stripy jacket with matching pink trousers that I had given her and also the pink stripy moccasin socks that Mhairi wore in Stockholm. They were too small for Skye when we got back to Stockholm so I brought them for Lisa. Actually, it looked like they were getting too small for Lisa too.

Gladys' house was a typical grey brick RDP hut with a corrugated iron roof. She had some trees in her yard but also an old taxi bus and a badly trashed car, the one that her brother was injured in. Her nephew is her sister's son and he is helping her brother by driving his taxi while he recovers from the accident. From what I understood of Gladys' description his car was hit in the rear while he was filling it up with petrol and he was badly injured in his arm and shoulder. There is a main room with kitchen and sitting area and then two small bedrooms at the side. Gladys had cracked linoleum on the floor, held together with tape, but most of the houses we visited had bare concrete floors or scattered bits of rug and carpet. Not all of the houses had the internal walls completed, some did not go right up to the roof and some just had pieces of fabric as room dividers. The toilets are outside but they are proper toilets, linked to the sewage system.

We left Gladys' house and drove to the church to meet Xoliswe. The church was a bit of a shock. It was the least established of all the buildings we visited. The entire thing was made out of corrugated iron and a flimsy wooden skeleton of struts and beams. It's a Seventh Day Adventist church so they meet on a Saturday and during the week it is a crèche for the area. There must have been forty or so children there with two adults looking after them all. The floor was covered with bits of carpet and all the furniture had been made out of crates and boxes. The piece of plywood which served as a door said GM Brasil in blue letters.

The children looked well dressed for the cool day and there was a jumbled mountain of bags and back packs in the corner. While I was taking the photos a smartly dressed lady in a uniform for the SPAR supermarket chain dropped off a sobbing girl of about four years of age. The little girl was wearing a pretty orange jumper and had bunches in her hair. Xoliswe tried to comfort her and we used the photo taking as a distraction. It seemed to work. A little boy, about eighteen months old, had gone to sleep with his bottle still in his hand on a filthy piece of foam on the floor. One of the things that Erin had organized for the crèche was a pile of plastic coated mattresses. I took a picture of them and of the blankets too. The ladies were preserving the mattresses by keeping them in their original plastic bags from the shop. You could tell that they were being used because the price and bar code stickers were dirty from the floor.

We drove around from house to house down the good roads and then onto the bad ones. It had rained and there were deep puddles and rivers in the small roads. It was rough going, avoiding rocks and shagging dogs. I had wondered what happened about mail in the township and then I saw what looked like it had once been a post office box cabin. It had small blue boxes which could be opened by keys and the door showed that

inside there was room for a post office worker to put the mail into everyone's boxes but now it was trashed with garbage piled up and bits ripped off.

At each house we were welcomed and thanked and I took only the pictures I was meant to take and did not just snap away like some press photographer or tourist because it would have been wrong and rude. Everyone enjoyed seeing the picture immediately afterwards on my digital camera and I promised to get them all copies. It was often quite dark inside the houses so when I got home I asked Wade to adjust the pictures on the computer.

Visiting Motherwell was quite an experience. One woman had a deaf and dumb son, a baby boy and a daughter who had just given birth to twin boys. They were all living in perhaps the poorest of the houses we visited. Erin had given them cement to render the house and keep the wind and rain out and a new door, one which would actually close. But they did not yet have the money to buy the sand that they needed to finish the job.

Gladys told me that the government only paid for the outside walls. Even her house doesn't have the second partition, only the one that splits it into two rooms, not three. She said she was hoping to have the money for the bricks by Christmas. She found it hard to sleep when it was raining because of the noise on the zinc roof. People are living in garages and they are among the lucky ones.

My volunteer job at the shelter for victims of domestic violence, or battered women as we used to say at home, was having mixed results. I enjoyed it but there were times when it was difficult. People didn't turn up or came late or didn't understand basic arithmetic which was a problem when we were supposed to be learning about spreadsheets. However one woman, Patricia, picked it up quite quickly. If she had had a PC at home and a chance to practise she would have done very well. She certainly had a focus for her interest as she was working at a fish-processing factory beside the docks and had just got a new job administering the wages. This was all being done by hand on a piece of A4 at the moment, some fifty employees split over the factory and the packing areas, some paid by the hour and some on piece work at a rate of 55 Rand cents per five kilo box. One lady in the example she brought me had packed 300 five-kilo boxes and 100 one-kilo boxes in a shift. The one-kilo boxes paid 28 Rand cents. The boss had promised to buy Patricia a computer to make it easier if she completed her training and despite the obvious lack of professional standards, competencies, assessments or anything else that I would have expected in Australia or the UK, the certificate being issued here would do.

Our time in Port Elizabeth was coming to an end. I had spoken to a kindly American man at the amusement park in the casino one night, just in passing, and he had commented that he found South Africans to be unfailingly polite and civilized so long as you never got onto the subject of race. I had settled in to a pleasant rhythm of life and adjusted to or accepted some of the fear and alienation I had initially felt. I was more comfortable than I had been. One day I went to the shopping centre on my own to buy some groceries and send some emails. I treated myself to a coffee and a scone at the café, which was busy, and an elderly lady who I had seen around the shops asked if she

could share my table. I had no idea why but she suddenly leaned over the table and said that she could not understand why so many people adopted black children. Weren't there enough of their own people to do it? I felt like I had been slapped and didn't know how to respond. I said well, it was surely better that the children had a family than stay in orphanages. This was, apparently, not the correct response so I looked away from her and saw the white woman with the little black girl in a pram and I realized what had happened. My table mate must have seen them coming.

Beauty the tea lady at Wade's work was retiring, forcibly, I think, at the end of September. She was seventy years old and when the HR lady asked her what she would like as a farewell gift she said food. Obviously, without her job, she was worried about how she would feed herself. People were invited to bring in tins and non-perishables or to donate money. Wade put 500 rand in an envelope and passed it to the HR girl who came round to his desk later to thank him.

Beauty was a tea lady who mostly made coffee and she brought it to you at your desk then cleared away the cups and made the place look nice. As nice as possible in a series of containers and temporary offices in a huge car park. She used to wash Wade's plate and fork on the days that I sent him to work with leftovers, curry or stir fry in a plastic box, as a change from sandwiches.

There was a big presentation on Friday at lunchtime. The office had managed to collect five archive filing boxes full of food for Beauty and they had bought her a little stove with four rings and a small oven. Beauty had only ever cooked with a paraffin stove before. They gave her some pre-paid electricity vouchers too. She wept. Her grand-daughter, who had a car, had come to collect her and her presents and take her home. The new tea lady was a young girl who had supposedly been in training for a week but there was no coffee that afternoon and on Monday the site manager had to go looking for her.

One weekend after we returned to Australia I found seventy rand in notes in one of Wade's pockets. I had not lived in Port Elizabeth for the best part of a year but I looked at those notes in my hand and it all came back to me. I wondered what to do with them. They sat on the kitchen bench top for a week. I looked at the Australia Post website and learned about the use of Registered Post services. I wondered if a registered post letter would make it to Motherwell Township. No valuables they said, very firmly. I bought such an envelope from the post office. I did not reveal my plans but even so the post lady gave me a stern warning about only using these envelopes for documents. I muttered something about photos and she grunted.

I decided to take a chance and post the money anyway. If it gets to Gladys then that will be great. If it doesn't, then I am sure the person who steals it must need it.