

Long enough in Jo'burg

May this year saw my white step-brother, Fabian, and I step off the plane in a blaze of sunshine at Johannesburg airport. My heart was in my mouth. I felt that anything could happen in this, the world's most controversial¹ country. Would people mistake Fabian and me for man and wife and arrest us? Fabian, who had been there before, assured me that we would be safe.

Queuing for immigration was lengthy and slow; I suppose we were all being checked to see if we were subversives in any way. I smiled toothily at the officer, and used my best English accent on him, but he eyed me suspiciously, and only after a five-minute gaze into a computer did he reluctantly let me through.

The airbus is the only form of mixed public transport in Johannesburg, so luckily Fabian and I could sit together as we whizzed through the Jo'burg suburbs. Large bungalows line the streets, interspersed with dinky little shops. Worn-looking African women, laden with shopping, plodded slowly in ones and twos, sulky white babies slumped on their backs. Men crowded around the shops, smoking and drinking beer out of cans. Few whites walked the streets, no Africans drove the cars.

As soon as we approached the town centre,

diamonds seemed to fall from the sky. Jo'burg glittered. Buildings shone in a haze of concrete and glass. Exquisite parks were dotted here and there, shops were filled with designer clothes, gold and precious gems, opulence radiated.

We alighted from the bus and picked up the heavy luggage. 'The hotel's a ten-minute walk away,' said Fabian. 'I usually walk through the station, but I'm afraid we can't today.' 'Why not?' The station was an enormous stretch of polished wood and glass, but completely devoid of passengers. Then I looked up at a huge sign above the station, and almost dropped the luggage in shock. 'WHITES ONLY.' The letters were huge and belligerent². I have read and read about such things, but actually seeing them in front of me, and knowing they actually meant business, shook me to the hilt. To think there is a law which says that Fabian can walk in that station, but his sister can't ... I was lost for words, and could only nod my head and pick up my bags.

A little way up I saw the sign: 'BLACKS, ASIANS, COLOURED.' A small, dark room crammed with people, arms and legs flailing³, yet no one seemed to be talking. No noise, just an ominous silence.

From an article by Zenga Longmore published in the weekly political and current events magazine
The Spectator, 21–28 December 1985

¹ controversial: South Africa enforced a controversial system of racial segregation known as apartheid between 1948 and 1994

² belligerent: aggressive

³ flailing: waving, moving agitatedly