

Many years ago, I made a New Year's resolution to never make New Year's resolutions.

Hell, it's been the only resolution I've ever kept!

DS MIXELL  
american author



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#### WHITE CHRISTMAS BLUES

Philadelphia: A Pennsylvania man who barricaded himself in his home on Christmas night and shot multiple times at 11 SWAT officers surrendered nine hours later when a negotiator sang him the holiday carol "White Christmas", authorities said.

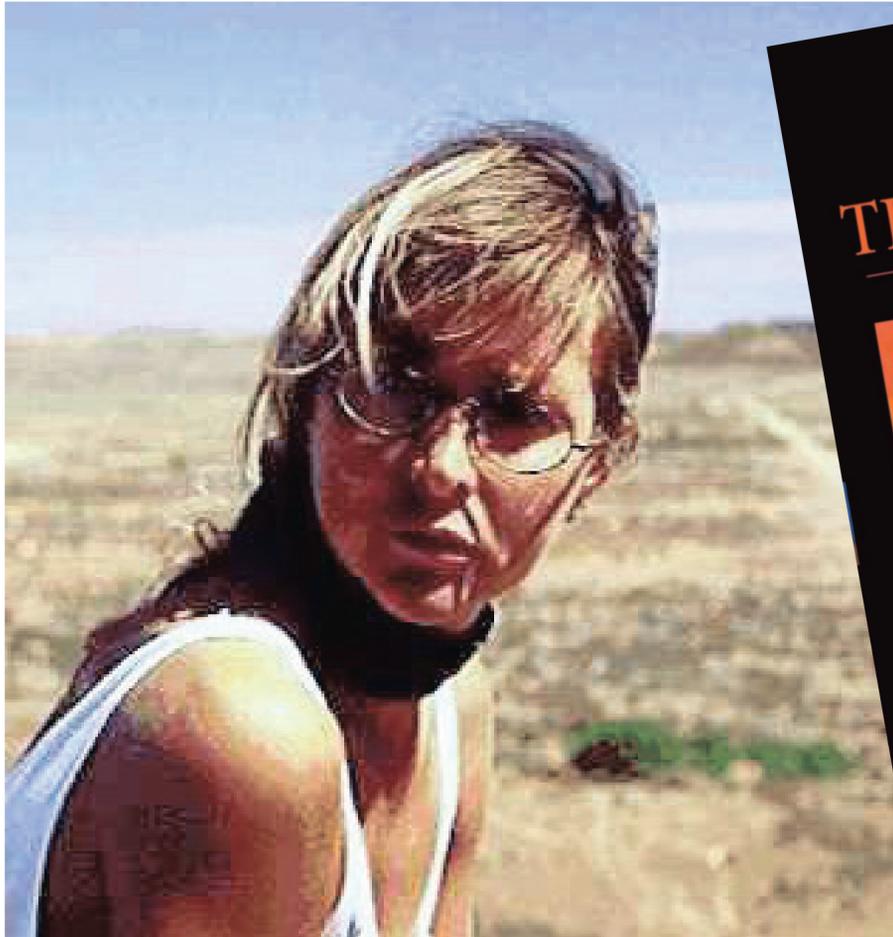
### Arianna Dagnino, *The Afrikaner*, Guernica Editions, Toronto, 2019

*A story of guilt, hate, love and redemption under the African sky.*

Zoe du Plessis's story unfolds against the backdrop of 1996 South Africa, caught in the turmoil of the transition from the apartheid regime to the first democratically elected black government.

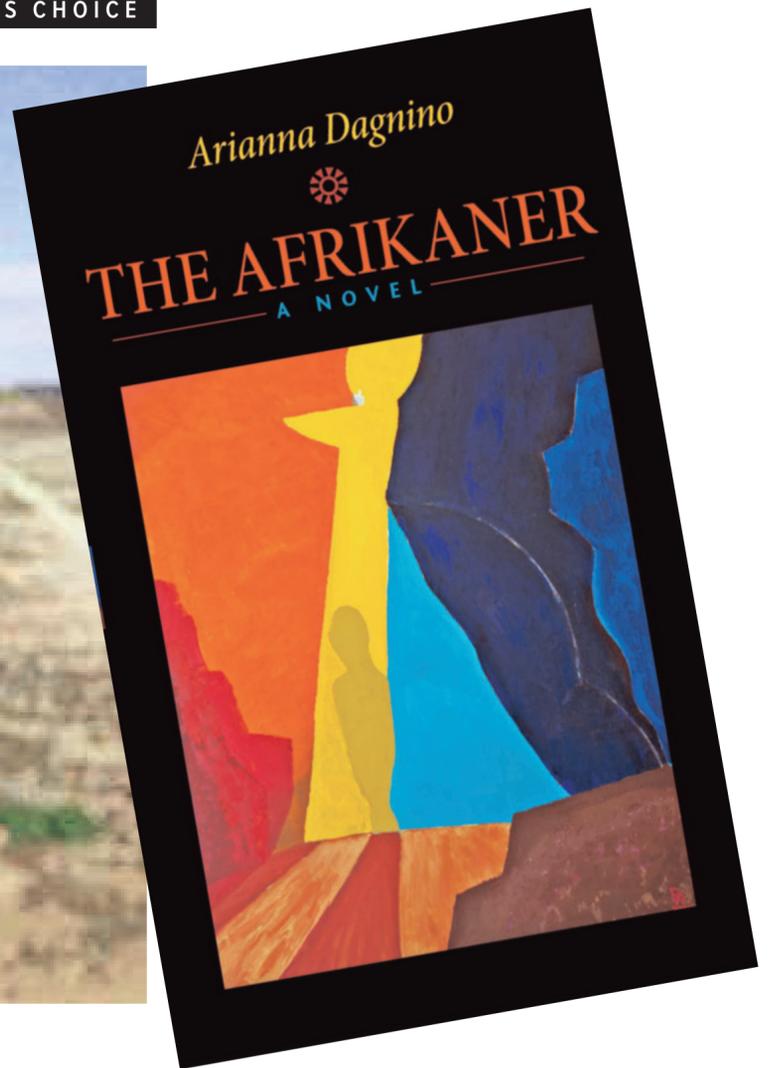
A paleo-anthropologist at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, her world collapses when her lover and colleague, Dario Oldani, is killed during a fatal carjacking.

Clinging to her late companion's memory, Zoe sets off to the merciless Kalahari Desert to continue his fieldwork. It's the beginning of an inner journey during which she gets to come to terms with a rising sense of guilt as a privileged white Afrikaner, while also confronting a secret that has hung over her family for generations. During a brief visit back home, Zoe meets an unlikely lover in Kurt, a legendary South African writer with a troubled past. The conclusion spirals the reader into a new perspective, where atonement seems to be linked inextricably to an act of creative imagination.



ARIANNA Dagnino in the Karoo in 1997.

#### EDITOR'S CHOICE



#### EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 8

THE next morning, as Zoe is having breakfast in Georgina's kitchen, her brother storms in, takes a couple of koekies from her plate and rushes to pour himself a cup of coffee. There's an unusual excitement in his eyes; for the first time since her arrival, he is trying to break through the desolate composure within which she has confined herself.

"Kom ousus, hurry up!" He gestures as if he wants to drag her from her chair.

"Where to?"

"Cyril Kunene. He's waiting for us under the big oak tree, by the river."

She looks away, while André sips his coffee. She's not in the mood to meet anyone – let alone Kunene. She's not ready to leave the sheltered cocoon of her apathy; all she feels like doing is crawling back into her bedroom. Yet, she can't let her brother down. In all these years, he has never asked for her help with the farm. She owes him.

André looks up from his cup and says, almost in a whisper: "Jolly's already saddled."

She keeps silent, still uncertain. André turns his back to refill his cup, lowering his head over the pot, as if in prayer.

She watches the nape of his neck now laid bare, totally vulnerable.

In a flash, she springs from her chair and darts out of the kitchen, into the courtyard. Two horses are waiting there, as she has expected. Jolly, her mare, snorts when she recognises her.

Out of the corner of her eye, Zoe sees that André is already at her heels. How many times did they rehearse this same scene in their youth?

She finds herself grimacing as she quickly tightens the girth strap. Then she jumps on the horse's back and rushes down the hill, along the passage that opens between the grapes... Zoe tightens her knees against Jolly's sides and the horse breaks into a wild gallop. Zoe glances over her shoulder and sees André leaning over his steed, urging it faster... André is gaining ground.

She feels her untrained leg muscles giving way and making her lose balance; she races the last few hundred metres clinging with one hand to the horse's mane. It's an undignified victory; most of all, it's a victory that leaves a bitter aftertaste in her mouth.

Under the oak tree, visibly amused, a young man in a steel-grey, freshly pressed business suit has followed the race.

"I bet on the right horse," he cries

as he takes Zoe's reins, holds her leg and skilfully helps her to dismount.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it," he answers in a polished English accent.

Zoe turns her head in time to catch André's childish, annoyed expression. "You cheated, as always."

Her brother quickly dismounts, the light of mockery still in his eyes. Then, turning to the man in the grey suit: "Zoe, let me introduce you to Cyril Kunene. Cyril, this is my sister, Zoe du Plessis."

Mr Kunene – to her he is not Cyril, yet – shakes her hand formally, looking straight into her eyes. The tall black gentleman standing in front of her shows the lean and self-assured look of a New Yorker accustomed to doing business in the city. He belongs in another league, she senses, as she takes in his features: soft, full lips, high cheekbones, beautifully shaped almond eyes slightly turning downward – indeed, a perfect poster man

for the post-apartheid era.

They sit around a wooden plank in the oak tree's shade.

Kunene takes out a bottle and three glasses from a cooler handbag.

"I thought you might be interested in tasting our new Merlot, aged in Nevers oak barrels."

He uncorks the bottle, briefly sniffs the cork, pours a small taste in his glass and checks the wine before pouring it into their glasses, starting with Zoe's...

André takes a liberal sip and waits for the aftertaste to kick in before expressing his approval: "It has a lovely character, soft and velvety. Perhaps that trace of wild fruit that makes our wines unique is a bit too pronounced here. It's still young, but quite promising."

"Goed," Cyril says, switching to Afrikaans. He too breathes in the southern fragrance from his glass, his eyes flashing proudly. "What about you, Mejujffrow Du Plessis?"

She looks at him slightly discon-

certed. The change of language hasn't gone unnoticed, nor has the subtle statement it implies. Cyril doesn't mind using a language he might despise if it helps to create a bridge between them, a space of familiarity.

Yet, how ironic. A black chooses to speak Afrikaans, the language of the former oppressor, while we Afrikaners are purposefully erasing it from our lives, ashamed to reveal what our blood sounds like. She hasn't forgotten the pang of embarrassment she felt when Dario once asked her: "How come you never speak Afrikaans with your people in public?"

She got herself off the hook, back then, with a pleasantry so out of her character: "Darling, since you don't understand it, it wouldn't be polite."

When in fact she would have had to admit she too was tacitly responding to the pressing need of changing skins on the run.

The prospective partner graciously gestures at Zoe's glass, bringing her attention back to it: "So?"

"I'm not an expert like you two..." she replies in a hushed voice, as it often happens to her when she feels, even briefly, the centre of attention.

As she speaks, Zoe meets her brother's anxious expression. How he longs for my approval. Thus, she improvises.

"But I confess I have a soft spot for Merlot. In this one, in particular, I recognise those notes that are dearest to me – the smells of the French countryside in autumn; the scents of distant things, perhaps lost forever."

"I admire people who can read poetry in a sip of wine," Cyril says, straightening his back. "A rare bunch, on the verge of extinction." Embarrassed, Zoe lowers her head and looks at her fingers tightly clasping the glass stem. Kunene senses her uneasiness and quickly changes the subject...

Zoe notices Kunene's natural ability in reading people. He shows a self-confidence, a natural ease in connect-

ing with his interlocutor and exploring unfamiliar emotional territories that are unimaginable to her.

He speaks slowly, distinctly enunciating each word, his hands spread on the table, his fingers perfectly manicured.

She takes it all in: his ultra-thin, square-cased Vacheron Constantin wristwatch, his single-breasted tailored suit, the monogram embroidered on his shirt pocket.

She hasn't seen his shoes yet. She doesn't resist the temptation and takes a quick look at his feet. There they are, a pair of handmade, black leather Oxfords, polished and worn just enough not to look too new. Kunene intercepts her look.

"I don't blame you, Mejujffrow. Dressed as I am, you might think I'm slightly out of place here in rural Africa, in the middle of a vineyard, under an oak tree."

"Well..." she mumbles.

"I assure you I'd feel much more comfortable wearing my jeans and a T-shirt, as you do. But let's be honest. We didn't meet here just to have a friendly conversation over a reasonably good glass of wine. We're here to talk business."

Zoe turns her head slightly to check her brother's reaction. André keeps looking into his glass; only a slight sheen of perspiration on his upper lip betrays some hidden tension. Kunene's voice lowers while he lays his honour bare at her feet.

"I'm never allowed to forget I'm black, least of all here in South Africa. Dressing up has become part and parcel of my business card. I'm sure you know what I mean."

Struck by the frankness of his confession, Zoe forces herself to keep her eyes on his, prodding him to go on.

"If I had shown up in casual attire, you'd have seen in me none other than another common black, one of those thousand 'garden boys' who patiently water plants and continue to be called 'boys' by their white baas. They never become 'men', even when they're well into their seventies."

He is so very right. Cyril Kunene can't hide behind anything, neither an Ivy League degree, nor an honourable career, nor a posh uptown apartment. His skin colour stands before everything else, even when it's covered in an Armani suit. Although unsettling, he has finally played the one card left in his hand: his frankness.

Why then doesn't she openly acknowledge his good reasons? What's holding her back?

## Under the big oak tree

#### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

BORN in Genoa, Italy, Arianna Dagnino studied in London, Moscow and Boston before entering journalism and international reporting. She travelled extensively across five continents (she still has to do her stint in Antarctica) and lived for long periods in various countries, including a five-year stint in South Africa. Between 1996 and 2000 she lived in Johannesburg, covering the historical transition to full democracy the country experienced in those years. After re-entering academia and earning a PhD, Dagnino started teaching at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. All this time, though, she has kept doing what she loves most – writing stories.

