



good thoughts. good words. good deeds.  
The unspoken impact of the #ImStaying movement.

**NATASHA M. FREEMAN**



PENGUIN BOOKS

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## Chapter 2

# And for that, #ImStaying

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On the morning of 7 September 2019, Jarette Petzer posted a video on Facebook. His heart was heavy with fear and concern for his country. Media headlines had been consistently dire over the last while: crime and gender-based violence was increasing; South Africa was fluctuating in and out of junk status on the international market; the consequences of State Capture were being felt and load-shedding had returned.

The blue sky blazed behind him as Petzer walked down a street in Cape Town recording the video. ‘A day like today reminds me what a beautiful country we live in, and how lucky we are to live in such a magnificent and glorious place,’ he said. ‘And we are full of issues, this is true, but this is true for so many other countries around the world right now. Many, many countries – many First World countries, and many Third World countries – all have their issues right now. Some of them are more severe than others and we’re feeling it; we’re feeling it because it’s been tough for us, it really has. But off the back of an article that I read this morning,<sup>6</sup> we by no means have it worse than anybody else ...’

The video was short, but Petzer spoke from his heart. The article he was referring to had appeared in *BusinessTech*, and outlined the challenges faced by entrepreneurs in places like

Turkey, Greece and South America. The point Petzer was making was that South Africa has issues, but it also has possibilities. There was still much in South Africa to fight for.

‘There was a lot stirring in me at the time,’ Petzer admits. ‘I was fearful for the state of our country, and for my child’s future. I was incredibly concerned about the state of our economy. More than anything, I was contributing to the problem in my own way by focusing on negativity in the media and helping to spread the dread by constantly being angry, complacent and, at times, awful to be around.’

Petzer explains that while feeling helpless and overwhelmed, he had an epiphany: ‘I woke up and decided I didn’t want to be complacent. I didn’t want to switch on the news, and I didn’t want to participate in all the ugliness that was going on around me,’ he says. ‘We were at such a low point as a country and I, like most of our countrymen, was contributing towards the problem by not only focusing on the negative, but also perpetuating it through my words and interactions. I was obsessed with politics, the poor state of our economy and the high levels of crime, and truth be told I felt trapped. I had no formal qualifications or special skill set. I had no money to speak of, but I had more options than I realised. And what I decided to do was to put out a video, and that video was just a message of gratitude being thankful for the country that we live in – the beautiful country that we live in – and trying to find optimism.’<sup>7</sup>

In the video, Petzer identifies the power of language to set a tone. ‘One of the things that we really need to think about is that the words that come out of our mouths are so powerful,’ he says. ‘We don’t realise how powerful. You know, words start wars, and words have the ability to break down or build up.’

You can't look at things in blanket terms – some parts of the country are doing well; some parts of the country are not doing well. But we've got to readjust. If we have challenges in life, we've got to learn how to readjust; how to reposition ourselves. But we cannot give up, we cannot put our hands in the air and we cannot say, you know, that's it, we're doomed, game over. It's not how wars are won.

'We've got to have faith and speak positivity into our lives and our country. And we've got to back that up with positive action as well. So, in this message, I just want to say to my fellow South Africans: guys, we are truly blessed, and we have challenges, but we can work through them, like we have done before. This is not the first time we've been faced with turmoil, not by a long shot, and this is not the last time that we're going to be victorious, standing together working towards a common goal. We have an opportunity to turn things around. Be positive, my countrymen and -women – let's stay focused on the good things, and let's try and speak positively wherever we can. It's not to blow smoke, and it's not to say things aren't the way they are, but no amount of focus on negativity is ever going to bring about anything positive. We cannot put our attention there. Our attention needs to be on the things that we can control; the things that we can adjust. One of them is the words we speak. I hope this message gets a bit of distance. I love my country, and I love my countrymen and -women, and I have faith in us, and I wish you all a blessed weekend from Cape Town.'

Petzer posted the video, which received a number of views from friends and family. One friend commented that he felt the same way – that the country was worth fighting for. This friend called himself a 'Stayer'.

Statistically, an estimated 23 000 South Africans emigrate annually.<sup>8</sup> Concerns about the state of the country, the economy, crime and divisive politics, and fear of what lies ahead for South Africa are among the leading reasons people leave. Immigration is a leading topic of conversation between those in a position to choose to stay or go. It is, however, not an option for the majority of South Africa's population.

'I was never leaving,' says Petzer. 'It was never an option for me. I don't have a passport, I'm one of those people who can't leave, so my thinking was, "I'm here, we're here, and we're in it together. So what are we going to do about it?"'

Another friend of Petzer's, Cheryl Ream, was moved by his video and suggested he start a group for people who felt the same way and wanted to be part of the conversation. So, Petzer started a Facebook page called #ImStaying. The next day, he shared a link to the page on his own timeline with this caption:

If you, like me, are planning to stay in South Africa and be a part of the solution, please join our group and help us create an atmosphere of positivity and encouragement for others trying to do the same!

Thirteen days later, the page had 55 000 members.



### **Agness Angel Tombo**

After struggling looking for a job, I decided to create one for myself. I became one of the women in construction. I have learnt that I and you can do something to build our legacy. I went through our group, #ImStaying, and I read many inspiration stories that gave me the voice to shout out '#ImStaying', because I am able to hire somebody. And I wish to grow to a higher level.



**Stephen Gerber**

So I am up in Jozi on business and it's after 7 p.m. Don't feel like restaurant food, so pop into a local supermarket and bought some self-catering stuff. Behind me in the queue I see out of the corner of my eye this guy. I sneak a look at his basket and note how carefully he has watched his budget. No treats in there at all. So, I recall what we stand for and ask him if he would be offended if I paid for his groceries. The joy on his face! So then I said to him, go get some chocolates. And that was it. South Africa is not perfect, but if we all just opened our eyes to each other we would recognise the beauty. My late friend Ralph Wadsworth said it's easy and almost lazy to see the dirt in each other. But to see the gold takes effort and is much more worthwhile. So, after paying for his basket, we greeted warmly and went our separate ways. Blessings to you all today. #ImStaying



**Lizzy Mothokoa**

My grandmother raised three generations. My mother passed away when I was 18 years old, and this woman raised me. I had my own children and she is raising them too. Always positive and gives the best advice. She shows me and my children nothing but love. That's why #ImStaying.

At twenty days, the page had 90 000 members. By the following week, that number had jumped to 220 000, then doubled again to 440 000.



### **Ramuthaga Maano**

#ImStaying to serve the community

Matric was done three times (2010, 2011, 2012)

2013 University 1st year

2014 Repeated 1st year

2015 2nd year

2016 Repeated 2nd year

2017 3rd year

2018 4th year

2019 (January and February covering hours to meet SANC requirements)

28 February 2019 That's when I took an Oath (it was the end of my journey)

14 May 2019 My Honours Degree in Nursing Science and Art was handed over to me. NB! Those years of struggle doesn't appear anywhere on my degree. Their support was enough.

I'm a proud NURSE.



### **Boitumelo Excellent Rapper**

So guys, I don't know who added me to this amazing group, but I'm really thankful.

So the system gave us categories to try and separate us: straight, gay, black, white, tall, short, midget, giant ... etc.

If we get rid of the category mentality, the world would be a much more peaceful place. The human Race should be the Human race, no categories. When I see a person, I don't wanna see race, I wanna see a human. Now that's a winner mentality.





**Sibo Vila**

I'm not a well-known person, my wallet is flat, no car, no house, unemployed graduate, but always when I read posts and comments from you good people, I feel like I'm an equivalent of the richest man in South Africa, I feel like I'm on top of the highest pyramid. Guys, you make my sadness vanish like a morning dew when the sun rise, you possess what is called a natural healing power. You're the reason why I'M STAYING. God bless you all.

At five weeks, over 600 000 people had joined the page, with 18.2 million collective engagements, including posts, comments, stories and shares.

Petzer was gobsmacked and delighted. At 1 000 members he thought, 'Wow, this is really taking off'; at 5 000, 'This is really exciting!' And then, in Petzer's words, the page 'just started avalanching'.

'We positioned the page to say, you know, tell us your stories, tell us why you love South Africa,' he says. 'As soon as people joined, we welcomed them and asked them to carry on inviting people, and it just spread like wildfire. I think people really resonated with the stories. We didn't know that people were going to start sharing these really deep emotional stories, and it just hit home for all of us.'

Some members of the group shared pictures of special locations, sunsets, beautiful views, wildlife, food, destinations and descriptions of their favourite things about South Africa. Others shared stories about their favourite people, of hardship and of moments of survival. These were stories that reflected a fortitude and depth of resilience that only South

Africans could understand, and members of the page began to respond as a collective.

A young high-school graduate from the township who had had a difficult upbringing tearfully expressed his joy at finding the page and what the stories meant to him – to see South Africans expressing love and support for each other across deeply divided mental and emotional barriers. Addressing every member on the group, he wrote, ‘You are my family, outside of blood family.’

The young man’s post was flooded with responses:

‘We love you.’

‘You are amazing.’

‘We support you.’

‘We see you.’

‘You have faced so much difficulty, look what you’ve achieved. Well done!’

‘Congratulations!’

‘We are here.’



### **Getty Soliwe**

This morning on my way to work I saw a woman with some old man, by the look of things I could see the old man was struggling to walk. As I drove past, something reminded me of this group, but I kept on driving. Again I was reminded of the group, so after a kilometre or so I made a U-turn. Waited on the other side of the road until they arrived.

The old man was sick and blind. I asked them where they were heading to and they said the hospital, which was not that far, but to someone who is old and sick and blind it was too far. I told them to get in, and I dropped them off in hospital. Because of this group, #ImStaying.



### **Khanyisa Mhlongo**

Last year around this time I was mugged and survived rape. Today I am a finalist of Miss Gauteng Exclusive. After years of torments about my skin, I have finally become this beautiful soul you see. I end by saying: Your perception of yourself affects your vibe, love yourself, be confident in the way you look, express your talents and let your vibe flow.  
#ImStaying



### **Dimpho Precious**

I lost my mother when I was a teenager due to HIV/AIDS. I was left with four siblings to raise. A seven year old; twins, three years old; and last born was one year old. Life was really hard. Three years later a good Samaritan by the name of Sindiswa Veronica Nongogo adopted all five of us. I am in my thirties now, and we have never felt a gap of not having a mother. I'm forever grateful, and for that #ImStaying. Help me to celebrate my mom.

Eleven thousand people celebrated Dimpho's mother with her. She received over 600 comments of support, with members expressing respect for her, acknowledging the underlying hardships they knew her family had faced, and sending endless wishes of joy to her grandmother who, like many in South Africa, had inherited the responsibility of raising young grandchildren after losing their own children to HIV/AIDS.

#ImStaying went from receiving 200 stories a day to 20 000, from South Africans of all races and backgrounds. There were stories from the rural Eastern Cape, from Johannesburg, Kwambonambi, the Karoo, Durban, Port Elizabeth, Ballito,

Cape Town, Khayelitsha, Soweto, Salt Rock, Alexandra, Sandton and farming communities in Mpumalanga. There were stories about Home Affairs – of long waits, of helpful people, of trying to make the best of systems being offline, of the issuing of the first Braille marriage certificate in South Africa. There were stories of black people helping white people, and of white people helping black people – of South Africans aiding each other, and of South Africans reaching out.

At this point, the administrative volunteers numbered sixty-four. Group members began to refer to each other as family, and collectively as ‘Stayers’.



### **Zuzumuzi Mona**

My brother and I decided to take our grandpa out for lunch at Hazyview, Mpumalanga. We had a great time together. When the time to leave came, we asked for the bill. The waitress came back to us and told us that our bill was paid in full by Dr Manzini. I was super perplexed, and without words for the very first time in the history of my entire life receiving such a gesture. We didn't even know this Dr. There are still kind people in this country.  
#ImStaying



### **Nolita Oliphant**

This is my first post and I'm completely overwhelmed. So, I have always had this conception that Pretoria whites are very racist (due to a certain encounter I had), so last night when my friends suggested we go to a nearby bar I was hesitant when I saw the bar full of only white people. We got in, and I decided to buy the first round. I asked the barman, who was also white, whether we are allowed to drink there or can we buy, and he was taken aback but he politely said, 'Yeah, everyone is welcome', so we sat by a corner out of the way not to draw attention to ourselves. Then this group of guys who look like rugby players came to our table. In my mind I was like, 'Oh no, here comes trouble.' But let me tell you, we ended up having the best and funniest night ever with those guys. Even two tannies came to sit with us as well. Wow, our country has come a long way.

#notallwhitesareracists

#ImStaying



### **Sandy Moutinho Boucher**

I'm loving this group more and more each day. I always come check up on my #ImStaying family to see how everyone's doing. The inspiration, motivation and love I see here makes my heart sing. I do one day wish to meet every single one of this family! That way we can all sit and share our stories in person.



**Thibo John-Otto**

I've only been on this group for less than 12 hours and it's changed my whole life! I love seeing positive stories and experiences of South Africa, because we're always surrounded by trauma and hate. I would just like to say that I appreciate all the posts on this app; it gives me an amazing dose of positivity and love.



**Richard Evans**

I'm lying in bed in Kingsbury hospital in Claremont at the moment after spinal cord surgery. My bed is next to a window that is open, and I can hear the traffic and people talking as they walk to work. Suddenly there was a lull in the noise, and the beautiful voice of an African lady broke the silence as she burst into song. Sitting listening to her brought a tear to my eye, and I thought that even as we face trials and tribulations every day, people like her can put joy into one's heart. Lady, whoever you are, thank you for uplifting my spirit today and may you be blessed.



### **Eric Pholoso**

After completing what I was studying for at university, just like any other young black guy from the small rural towns, I had the same thought like everyone else: I wanted to get a job and the overseas thing was about to happen. But before then I was working at a garden centre since I am a horticulturist. Being friendly like I am, I had few people who would come to the garden centre I worked in to buy plants or just to check in. There is an Afrikaner guy by the name of Marius Langhoven from Stellenbosch. I never saw myself become entrepreneur at my twenties; I thought I was too young for that, but that brother made me see myself in a certain way that I didn't. Since I met him in 2015, aged 26, I wanted to be an entrepreneur more than looking out for employment. It has not been easy, but today I am small-scale farmer, and bit by bit my business is growing. If I hadn't met that Afrikaner brother, I wouldn't know I have what it takes to be a businessman. #ImStaying and thanks for this group to the admins and everyone who is part of it.



### **Nhlanhla Yende**

I was raised by a single parent in most of my years a mother a security worker, earning R1800. Plus my grandmother's pension. Took me to college, not easy, now I'm an electrician, bought my first car yesterday. The power of women, though 🙏🙏. #ImStaying because women of RSA are so strong.



### **Sikhokele Kelle Tembani**

Evening brothers and sisters, I'm also a newbie here and I'd like to share my story. Last year I met this guy called Austin Summers while auditioning for Revolution Twins. He approached me saying he loved my voice, and he offered to produce a single for me free of charge, no royalties or anything, no matter how much the song made. And he did as promised. The song got playlisted on various radio stations around South Africa. He had no friends or siblings, so we eventually became friends because he believed in me, even though he didn't know me. Until today he's my best buddy and people ask how did I become friends with a white guy, and I say, 'Respect and love see no colour' coz we respect each other ... This week he is coming to Jozi so that he can make another song for me as a solo artist. He said, 'Kelle, you are South Africa's Adele – your voice is powerful, your writing skills and your strength give me hope ...' That made me cry, coz no one has ever said such words about me. I want to make him proud just for believing in me. #IamStaying #Lovewins #Friendship



### **Kwanda Radebe**

Whoever is chopping onions in this group must stop, my eyes are always teary because of all the beautiful testimonies I read here. So much love, there is hope indeed. #ImStaying. Enjoy the day, Brothers and Sisters.



By mid-October, 700 000 people had joined the #ImStaying page, but it was not without its problems. Very soon after inception, members who had been blocked for breaking the page's rules began forming a variety of counter groups. Anger over having a post denied or a comment deleted fuelled a growing critical space, which questioned the intent and purpose of #ImStaying.

Controversy was rooted in the rules of the group, which are administered as filters to story submissions and comments through a team of volunteer moderators, including Petzer. Not all stories submitted to #ImStaying are approved. Comments can be reported, and members deemed aggressive, divisive or working against the spirit of the group can be blocked. On multiple occasions, Petzer clarified to media that the rules for the group had never changed and were there to protect members. In an interview with eNCA,<sup>9</sup> he further clarified that 'The rules are very simple in their nature. No bullying and no hate speech. We don't tolerate anybody that tries to belittle anybody or go against anybody's race or sexual orientation. We don't discuss politics on the group, we don't discuss religion on the group. And all posts and commentary is aimed at upliftment – uplifting people or uplifting the country – and those are the basic fundamentals of the group. It's really simple; we haven't tried to overcomplicate things. Just come with a willing spirit; that's all we ask. All we're doing as moderators and administrators of this group is to steer the content and make sure that the sentiment is in the right place. The group is completely self-aware, and expansive.'

At the time of Petzer's interview with eNCA, the group had 140 000 members. In Petzer's mind the rules of the group would remain the same, regardless of its size. 'We're seeing a

real melting pot of cultural diversity and understanding, and the walls – the divisions – are just dropping,’ he said. ‘It’s a beautiful thing. All are welcome. Even the guys that are not in South Africa – and I want to make this very clear: if you’re not in South Africa, and you’re an expat, and you’re missing home, you’re welcome – all we ask is that you help with encouragement of our country. Help uplift our people.’

Nevertheless, accusations that the group was racist, elitist and ‘too positive’ fuelled a critical #ImStaying counter-narrative, which openly accused members of the group, including admin and Petzer, of being blind to the problems of the country and pretending everything was fine when it was not.

#ImStaying members began responding to recommendations that they should join the counter groups to become ‘educated’ and learn why #ImStaying was a ‘dangerous’ place. On multiple occasions, critics joined the #ImStaying page and mocked how quickly they were blocked after being critical of members’ posts. #ImStaying stories were also shared on counter groups for dissection and criticism.

But between the most aggressive critical voices there was genuine concern about South Africans’ intentional or unintentional complicity in maintaining a mental status quo from the past, specifically as a result of the language used behind closed doors about other races. There was also concern about not realising that privilege not only creates social and economic imbalance, but also perpetuates it; for example, behind a wonderful relationship between an employer and a domestic worker was her children at home who had missed her their whole lives, and behind every child posing with a smiling gardener was a leaking shack with no electricity.

Glimpses of the same emotional pain that brought people from the #ImStaying page together began to appear in the critics' narrative.

However, while sometimes raising valid concerns, the critical space mostly raised questions, particularly with regard to the fact that this narrative appeared to require the continued division of South Africa's citizens. Did the critical space desire cohesion? What was supposedly disallowed – friendship, kindness, mutual respect and grace? What *was* allowed – only derision, anger and division? Were there solutions this space wished to provide? What was its answer to the problems in South Africa – blocking appreciation of other cultures and strict divisions between cultural identifiers? What was appreciation of each other's cultures allowed to look like, if not the posts on the #ImStaying group? The existence of the counter groups also raised another important question: Who has the right to define the way people experience their own story, or tell it?

While critics of the #ImStaying page expressed anger and frustration about the fact that the page existed at all, Stayers remained confused as to why anyone in a country with so much suffering and division would want to contribute to maintaining it. During this time, some members left the #ImStaying page, but thousands more joined.