

I'm a Terrible Neighbor & Its Your Fault, Chicago.

Living in a Chicago high-rise has turned me into a pathological liar. I prefer to think of it as social lubrication, however.

“Hi, Mrs Harris. It’s OK, you can get in. Trixie is adorable.”

She’s not. She smells like fresh poop. Trixie that is.

I fantasize about jumping off the roof just to scare my neighbors. I will pull faces as I plummet to the ground, thereby ensuring my noisy neighbors will be guilt-ridden and shamed into trauma counseling for years.

“Of course not. Can’t hear a thing. In fact, we often wonder if you’re even at home.”

They are. And the sound emanating from their subwoofers will eventually wake the 4,000 Confederate fallen who are buried at the site of today’s Lincoln Park, which is a block or three up the road.

Having lived in mostly rural locations in Africa for most of my life, the adjustment to micro-negotiations in a quasi-community is a slog. I had to get used to bestowing instant cheer and compliments.

“What? Could not even tell anyone was up there?”

I could. They were having sex. The roof deck is right above our unit, and the yellow 70s frayed and rickety recliners squeak. A lot. There is also the unspoken but coercive pressure to find *something* to comment on that at least conveys a modicum of civility, yet conceals a bitter truth.

“Sure! I want to hear all about Tawny and Amber’s struggle to find patterned lampshades in this old white-lampshade-world.”

Nevermind the white lampshade struggle. Inequality is real y’all, but you’d never think so in this toasty lake-adjacent habitat. Coming from a country with eleven official languages, the pale planned enclaves of the American city takes getting used to.

Even for Chicago, one of the most diverse cities in the United States, the Near North of the city is surprisingly white. Heavily written about recently by *The Atlantic*'s Ta-Nehisi Coates, redlining cut up American cities along racial lines, in effect creating pockets of wealth and home-ownership, as well as pockets of low credit-risk scores, outlined in red—redlined. It's not hard to tell which pockets were contrived for whites.

But, we have also made lifelong friends in the city with broad shoulders and a windy reputation. Sultry late-summer street parties where fairy lights light up food trucks, happen right outside our door. We've had rooftop barbecues with fellow South African émigrés who are advised to avoid the yellow chaises longues, of course. We've celebrated Thanksgiving with our Chicago friends who have become like family and some of our new American friends have visited our small guesthouse in South Africa. From our Chicago home we watch the yearly air show and, perhaps my favorite, a myriad small fireworks displays punctuating the vista on every 4th of July.

I never forget that I'm just a farm boy from a dustbowl in Africa who didn't wear shoes until he was six. And I can't help but feel a deep, sweet charitable joy once in a while, channeling Gwen Verdon as she belts out Cy Coleman:

“Right in a pot of jam
What a setup, holy cow!
They'd never believe me
If my friends could see me now!”