Ghost Limb

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis, submitted as part of an M.A in Creative Writing, takes the form of a novel set in a small coastal town outside Cape Town and follows the life of Johanna, a maid to a pastor's family in the early 90s. At the centre of the novel is the relationship between Johanna and a first-person child narrator. Johanna arrives and sets out to undermine the household and social order with increasingly bold acts of violence. She is abusive but despite the sporadic abuse the narrator and Johanna develop an odd friendship. Her past is revealed in late night confidences (a paraplegic mother, a white employer who she identifies as family and a stint in a squatter camp where she loses her ID).

Near the beginning of the novel the child and Johanna embark on a quest to obtain her birth certificate from her old employer (needed for a new ID). The journey is unsuccessful but signals the start of a kind of sympathy between the two protagonists (with insight by the narrator into Johanna's past).

Johanna finds a kind of belonging in the neighbourhood and with the narrator's family, particularly with the neighbourhood children. She is like a child herself and they become a neighbourhood pack roving the streets on bicycle. But Johanna has periodic rages, throwing bricks or abusing pets and comes to focus her ire on the youngest member of the family, the narrator's youngest brother.

When political forces at large come into play (as well as an increased sense of danger), the adults set out to anglicize the family in a half-baked attempt to emigrate. The children are sent to English schools and Johanna, sensing her loosening grip on the family ramps up her reign of terror. She recruits the narrator in a plot against her brother, a prank only half comprehended that she consents to in order to placate Johanna. When the time comes, they dress up as "bergies", capitalising on the paranoia of the time. They ambush her brother and what (at least for the narrator) was a game turns into a horrifying dismemberment of her brother.

Johanna disappears for weeks but returns for one final confrontation outside the pastorie. After this Johanna disappears permanently from the life of the narrator and her family, and her brother is patched up with little visible impairment. Soon afterwards the family moves to a security complex, an island of safety in the crime-ridden reality of South Africa that recalls their European dream. Years later the narrator interrogates this suppressed chapter and longs for the Johanna of her childhood in relief to the cultural anonymity that has become her life.

Constructed in episodes that succeed each other spatially rather than chronologically the novel seeks to reconstruct the childhood landscape while building obliquely to a tragic climax. The style is lyrical, referencing magical realism and could be read as an effort in prose poetry with paragraphs operating as lyrical units. Of interest to the story are themes of cultural and physical homelessness as well as language itself as it relates to a stable cultural identity.

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Prologue

Sometimes I think she still lives there. It's difficult to imagine her anywhere else. She has always been there, in her place or in some tragic ditch. Conjuring her anywhere in between would have been too strenuous. Nor did I see her again, to ask the unasked questions, to settle the score, to have an awkward reunion – I see us chummy, pretending we were great friends. None of this happened.

For the longest time, she has ceased to exist for me, for all of us. In previous accounts, I might have neglected to mention her, as if her life had no impact on the course of our lives, as if it was completely separate, an inessential aside. As if nothing had happened. And as if a chain of causation cannot be traced beyond what is expressly visible, a finely-stitched scar, scarcely a seam in the surface. It has taken us years but we have managed to forget it all.

She had been excavated from our collective memory, from the soil of our backyard, but now hardly a handful could be exhumed without hitting bone, her bones, mixed up in everything, though there is scarcely a bit of flesh left. She has become a figment, a ghost – too hideous to forget but only barely remembered. A bare account this will have to be, a carcass so grotesque it is to be consumed in oblique pieces.

After the last day, she was immediately long-gone and rarely mentioned. Perhaps the odd slip from my mother, painfully inappropriate: "What would Johanna say about *that*?" This followed by laughter that dies mid flutter when no one joins in. No one laughs with my mother.

We forgot about her. We forgot only because we wanted to, because it was *unpleasant* – especially at the end – probably more so than we'll ever be willing to admit. Our smaller forgetting occupies its negligible space in the larger national forgetting, the shameful decades, the backyard, condensed and smoothed into a tidy reserved memorial plot – adjoining plots – so we would not have to enter eternity alone. It stands in the graveyard of historical atrocities, occupying borrowed time, residing in condemned space. What we did not know is that soil does not forget. It can lay in wait forever, while we resume our lives, while we push on with our affairs, and as sure as rain, one day we'll slip and land right back where we started.

We had thought we were special, different, not like other Afrikaners, exempt somehow. We were, after all, still children, and our parents (my father with his fair-minded facts) told us what we were and what we were not. They wielded the powers of parents: omniscience, education and common sense; omnipotence, age and authority with wizardly assurance, perhaps the most powerful of these, selective amnesia: the power to make anything normal.

But the holes in the fabric of our tired old heritage are showing through, and the forgetting has gotten out of control. It has taken everything, swallowed it whole: the dirty laundry, the rug under which these things get swept, the ruffled curtain and whatever was behind, underneath, inside. We have started to look old and worn and strangely flat – threadbare for our flatness. How horrific to see your childhood reduced to a stereotype.

Perhaps the passage of time has done its own damage. There are years of occupied days that lapse in seconds with no monument to their credit. I'm aware of the innovative tricks that memories play, remembering as afflicted as forgetting, but if invention is wringing cloth like dirty laundry, forcing and twisting events into contrition, then this is a true story, an account that lets the material do its own unfolding, wherever the pattern may reveal: perhaps only chaos – the chaos of a flowered dress – where the print stretched endlessly over the broad backs of *tannies* in church. Perhaps a structure will emerge that resembles the crocheted tablecloths or socks that my grandmother yarned together from scraps. Perhaps, as many things do, it will lead only to further unfolding, an endless unravelling that amounts to nothing superior to cloth wringing (the ruffled lace, the childhood veil obscuring the extremities of life). What interests me most, I'm unashamed to say, are the holes, the edges, where the rules of the print don't apply, that which has been forgotten but may be recovered, or patched with another scrap – us Afrikaners know how to make a plan, how to preserve things.

In the end, I believe the holes are the way back into ourselves, that they are the entry point. The others may never come to admit this – to remember – and it will be me on my own for now. They will think I have destroyed all that was special about us once, protected by forgotten-ness, by the complicity of our forgetting. They will think I have betrayed them and joined her in her ditch.

That said, my recollection of events will be called into question. Even my brothers might

deny these memories, saying I'm twisting it all around, or my father: making a big deal out of nothing. My mother will remain mute and acquiescent, but really they know better. In every telling of events, *she* would be there, her prominent jaw jutting into all our affairs. I always knew it was she who ruled us, she who terrorised us, she who is still there – crippled herself – but waiting, waiting all the better for this.

Part 1

The Backyard

Chapter 1: Die Hok

She lives at the periphery of thoughts like she inhabited the encampment at the edge of the backyard, “Die Hok” as she named it, “Die Hok” as we came to call it, positioned at the centre of a labyrinth: room, bathroom, *stoepie*,[1] a small square yard sloping inward with – bizarrely – a drain at the centre, the entire unit built, it seemed, from liberally slathered concrete. There was a partial cubicle wall that obscured it, connected it to the long corridor for the washing line which opened into in the larger concrete yard. I always felt the backyard was shamefully dilapidated and never let my friends back there.

It was accessible through the kitchen washroom, seldom unlocked, or more directly through a ramshackle wooden gate (quite difficult to scale), this behind the garage and a garden of neglected Christmas roses. Unlike the front of the house, its large glass panes and marble pillars, the front garden tended by the church’s workers, the backyard was a decrepit embarrassment. It was a concrete wasteland but for the weeds and dandelions sprouting from cracks in the concrete slabs, the fruit from plum and fig trees rotting on beds of arid sun-scorched soil. In the winter, it rained so much the entire yard, encased in concrete, flooded almost to our knees. The ducks we kept would love it, the bleak terrain changed briefly into a pool.

However decrepit that space, she ruled it supreme with music and smoke from an improvised braai that my mother incessantly, but to no consequence, complained made the laundry stink. I used to walk the long shadow of the washing line to her domain, treading audibly so I would never surprise her, feeling her eyes behind the window draped with tattered sheet. The pounding of bare heel against concrete, an uncomfortable impact in the bones: the key was to keep walking. She sometimes held my brothers prisoner in there doing who knows what. In these blank excluded periods, I only know the indistinguishable shouts from arm twists and roars of laughter. I’m convinced that even my father, the *dominee*, was afraid of her and her jutting chin.

[1] veranda

For a while before she came, the room at the edge of our property must have stood vacant. It is too strange to think. The *pastorie*, like a few of the older houses in our neighbourhood with foyers and high ceilings, came with this archaic appendage. We referred to it then, quite unselfconsciously, as the "*bediendekamer*" or servant's room, as if we were the young masters of a number of servants and as if a maid (commonly pronounced "*meid*") was the same as the British servants in period pieces: occupying servants' quarters, receiving remuneration, performing specially defined duties. A maid's duty was primarily to clean, although in those days, a number of household chores not strictly cleaning came along with this, and as was often the case, included looking after the children.

We'd had a series of maids in our early childhood, coloured women sent by my mother's people on the farm. None of them lasted long enough for me to remember much. There is the worn-out face of an old woman bathing us, and a few of their names return: Sophie, Lydia, Netta, with her soft *kopdoekies* that we tugged at to tease her. The only thing I remember about Netta, besides her threadbare headscarves, is what my parents declared after she disappeared: she ran away. I couldn't imagine why she would run away, and playing in the garden, I sometimes thought I'd find her hiding in the bushes.

The day Johanna arrived marked a change. She walked in, and immediately we knew she would be different. She didn't wear a *kopdoek* and spoke flawless Afrikaans in a white person accent (which impressed my mother to no end). There was no trace of Netta's rolling Swartland r's, nor Sophie's husky drawl ("*mirrag mevrou*"[2]). Johanna seemed more like a guest than a maid, a strange guest invited into our house to stay forever. Standing in the foyer, all projecting jaw and cheekbone (reminding me of the pterodactyl dinosaurs in my illustrated books), her eyes surveyed us from the shadow of a sloping brow, accented by peaks of uncovered hair.

There was no ingratiating show of affection, no pretence for my mother. She appeared nothing but sullen, almost snobbishly so, prepared to do the job at hand and this in spite of herself.

These facts about her scared me. It seemed she would disrupt our playing. She was not someone to go ignored. We hid behind the tea trolley as my mother called for us to come out and

[2] 'Afternoon missus.

say hello. We would pay for that reluctance later.

The first few days, she was perfectly mute. She sullenly went about her business, and we avoided her as much as we could. When she finally spoke up, she pretended it was us who'd been quiet: "Wat's jy stom? Don't you have any manners, huh?"[3]

Our sole preoccupation in those days: her refusal to wear a *kopdoek*. I suspect now that she was loath to be identified a common *meid*, the mark of *meid* having become for white people inextricably linked with the triangle of fabric tied around their heads while they worked. These women were considered a dime-a-dozen, interchangeable, dirty, useless, good for nothing but cleaning, *vloerlappe*, doormats, rags, marked not arbitrarily then by the often shabby *doeks* worn on their heads.

I expect we tugged at Netta's headscarf because we sensed she was ashamed of the appearance of her bare hair, but this embarrassment was circumvented by Johanna. Johanna did not mind calling her hair *kroesies* but more often referred to it as "*die kop*", as in: "Die kop moet nog gekam word."[4] This she did with a small plastic comb, briskly, like John Travolta from *Grease* might slick back his hair.

We watched as she went about her tasks, wearing long skirts and bulky jerseys (not for her the brightly checkered overcoats from Shoprite-Checkers), *plakkies* that clicked as she walked, carrying out jobs previously thought impossible by our mother. We lingered in earshot if she talked to our mother about the other *dominee's* wives she worked for (Dominee Solly's wife on alternate Thursdays) or answered the phone and used the same superior tones.

I hung around when, balanced flatfooted on a barstool, she hooked the metal eye of the skylight with a wooden pole or watered the ferns up there. Catching me idle, she charged me with holding the can or balancing the stool, but this was as close as we got: still watchful, resistant, measuring each other up.

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[3] What are you, mute?
[4] The head still has to be combed.

Johanna was squat, not short but disproportionately broad for her height. This made her look ready for anything, unlikely to be pushed down. An even matte brown, her skin always looked dry and warm, like hard-baked earth. And she *was* hard, despite a protruding belly that, without touching, I knew would be hard too, solid and infertile as a stone.

One night after dinner, my mother enquired if she were pregnant as a joke, ill conscious of how the reference to her body, to sheer femininity, would be received. They were both in the vicinity of the kitchen sink, my mother reached for an affectionate jostle of her middle, which Johanna expertly dodged before flushing bright pink. Her tight-lipped grimace said it all, but my mother persisted, "Are you *sure*, Johanna?", until she answered: "*Dis van vreet mevrou*."[5] My mother sidled up to her till they stood hip to hip, an arm around the waist like they were to take a bow after a performance (us children the captive audience). It was an image I never forgot, my mother beaming alongside Johanna's slumped shoulders. My mother's late night jollity was the only time I saw Johanna embarrassed.

For the rest, Johanna was beyond shame. Rather, she saw it as her self-appointed job to impose it on me, her actual work going unfinished. To show up my badness, to reveal it at every opportunity; to offer it up to me, piece by piece, irrefutably. She always had proof, discarded toenails, dirty underwear, she would finger these with disgust, wrenching humiliation from the fabric, drawing out her disdainful white-person sentences. To think I had lived so long uncensored.

Despite moments in which I was certain she loathed me, and in which I resolved to hate her forever, she kept me guessing. On the way back from school I was anxious to anticipate which Johanna I'd meet at home. There was the greeting, so important, always dutiful and enthused, and being sure to seek her out first. She wasn't an enthusiastic greeter herself, barely more than a too-busy grumble emitted even on her good days, but then there were those days when you just knew and felt ridiculous for the vigour of your hellos.

Other days, decidedly chummy, she would act as if nothing had happened (the

[5] *It's from eating, madam*. Note: *vreet* is used to describe the way an animal eats, as opposed to *eet*, which describes human consumption.

closed-mouthed sneers as I passed her in the hallway only days before: "*vieslik*"). I never protested, too glad to avoid further confrontation, and if the good days lined up, even my innermost defences would begin to slip as I started to like her. Her voice sounded so candid and sincere.

Sometimes she would be my friend, perhaps only as I joined in on her gossip about the other neighbourhood maids (whom she called "*meide*"), or snuck some of my father's wine from the topmost kitchen cupboard, toes balanced deftly on a shaking wooden barstool (she was always "lookout", never incriminating herself). But I would no longer care that our friendship was ambivalent, that it was probably fake, so much did I relish the feeling that comes from the conspiracy of allies. (Of course, a conspiracy presumes someone on the other side, and this is where the trouble crept in.) Safely in the backyard, she would drink from a chipped enamel cup (*her* cup) and sometimes let me have a companionable sip.

My friend, with her flawlessly white Afrikaans, so generous, her conspiratorial manner intoning: we women, we know each other's secrets. I would be so relieved when I found this friend in the kitchen that I mistook it for happiness.

Other times, when I could smell throat lozenges on her breath, she was busy, sullen, ejecting me from the kitchen: *Voetsek hier uit!*[6] She would leave these slick little gems, clues, where she was cleaning and would happily pop them back in her mouth if she encountered them again (her audible sucking making sure we remembered she did not have any teeth).

On other, more volatile occasions still, she was clumsy and mannish and looking to cook up trouble. There was a slurred perversity in her when she was like this, and I knew there was nothing to be done. Indeed, it is my own complicity, my own share of guilt that has kept me quiet, opportunely hidden in her silence and obscurity. We have been bound together, her and I – my motives within her motives – my own small fist inside hers. To access her might mean at last to access myself, my own fisted heart.

[6] Get out of here! (offensive, usually to animals)

Chapter 2: Plum

What I know about her life before the *pastorie* doesn't amount to much. Johanna rarely spoke about her past, and when she did she liked to pretend you already knew all the particulars. The scraps I have gathered are from our late-night conversations while she mopped the kitchen floor. With her work for the day being nearly done, she would grow chatty and emphatic, telling these ordinary little stories with theatrical buildup, which to my frustrated expectations always lacked substantial punch, while she skimmed over what seemed to me the important things: *How her mother lost her leg? What happened to her father?* I never asked these questions. (Sometimes the big things were more politely passed over in silence.)

She came to me one night, eyes bulging and looking like she was going to burst. I was at the kitchen table while my mother prepared a last serving of toast. Johanna was all business until we were alone, then she signaled me to the washroom with a sideways jerk of the head. She was more comfortable in there, like the ruffled curtain and built-in cupboards afforded it some special insulation.

She steeled her fists against the ironing board and hunkered down a little as if to contain something. It escaped anyway: "I have to…" she breathed between snorts of laughter "…tell you something!" she finished in a squeak. I waited while she was gripped by a fit of body-shaking mirth. Every time she seemed composed enough to start, it gripped her again.

"I was visiting Dora nê…" Her eyes were streaming, but she had pulled herself together. Dora was the neighbours' maid who'd moved in across the street and lived in a Wendy house in their backyard. "Coming out, who do I see at the front door?" She paused as if she expected an answer. I waited.

"Tannie Maaarie…" she said in a nasal drawl, impersonating the snobby old woman who was her employer on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. "Marie biscuit", as we liked to call her, lived in a block of flats on Beach road with a fountain and palm trees that reminded me of *Santa Barbara*, a soap opera I watched when home sick from school. Evidently she'd taken it upon herself to welcome the new residents.

"She was saying goodbye, so I hung back…" Johanna was shaking again, gearing up for something, and I was a little worried it would be a joke with a punchline I didn't understand.

"So, she's walking, and I'm walking behind her…"

At this point, she's really struggling, biting down on her gums: all chin and compressed lips. I'm about to ask for more information when a sound, an explosion, emanates from her mouth: a fart, so long and drawn out in intermittent squeaks, the high-pitched kind at which old ladies in particular seemed most proficient.

"Plop, plop plop, fweeeeeeeep..." She pantomimed a little strut in tandem with her mouth, the sound varying an octave with each movement of her rear. She had to repeat the ending several times to get it right: "fweeeeep", just the tiniest of toots.

She took on a serious look: "Now I was sure I'd be found out..." She was back in character, clutching an imaginary handbag, drawing out the suspense. She started scanning her field of vision, left, right, left again, oscillating her head like a security camera or perhaps an electric fan. Then she couldn't bear it anymore and hammered home the point: "She didn't look behind her! Not even a glance over the shoulder!"

She was bent over again, fully herself: "She didn't… She didn't look behind her!" She repeated this like a mantra, gasping for air.

Just then, we heard my mother come in, and Johanna snapped into yet another role: brushing some imaginary dust from her skirt, striding out from the washroom to retrieve the bucket from beneath the kitchen sink, stony-faced, efficient.

"Not finished yet, Johanna?" my mother enquired, who perhaps did not especially like us talking like this and, besides, believed she should be able to get her work done by three.

Johanna grew up with a single mother who was long dead by the time she came to us, though, for how long, I cannot say. Her mother had only one leg. How she lost the other, if indeed she was born without it, is a mystery to me. Perhaps this fact could explain a lot about Johanna, as the tragedies of our parents can. Perhaps the tragedy is there at the beginning: she comes into the

world at a disadvantage, entering though the first passage of life not between two pillars bracing her arrival but from a broken, unbalanced body whose pride and love would ill compensate for the physical shortcomings. But probably the missing limb is only part of it, another unknown factor.

Her mother was a big woman from what I could make out in a photograph she took out to show me once. In the small brown photo with the crinkle-cut edge, she stands beside a row of white women, chest puffed in canny contrast to her stump (propped on a wooden broomstick-like peg), face tilted in a familiar defiance, though more impressive, being more handsome and well-proportioned than Johanna's. I marvelled at the obvious pride, perhaps a learned arrogance, a necessary defence in the face of deformity. The name that comes to mind is "Hannie", but this could be backwards, confused with a nickname for Johanna herself – though to imagine her as a child, a little pigtailed Johannie Katerina Meyer, is too strange.

No, they called her "Plum", the white family with whom she and her mother stayed. She sometimes spoke very fondly of them, as if they were family, though, other times, she claimed they beat her poor crippled mother viciously. I assume her mother was the family maid – there being no other conditions for such a mixed living arrangement – though she never spoke of them like this (but that was her way, never conceding lost ground). I try to imagine what it was like: her crippled mother performing the chores of a bunch of able-bodied people, to imagine this as Johanna's reality growing up. But still, she spoke of them fondly, their shortcomings amounting to mere annoyances, their small tokens and second-hand things she cherished like a doting grandmother. Indeed, she called the youngest ones "*my kinders*"[7]. I imagine she grew up thinking their parents were her favoured white siblings or cousins.

She would relate their news during our late-night conversations in the kitchen, give me updates of who was marrying whom, who was having a baby, who'd gotten in trouble with the law, who turned out lesbian, while she took her time slicking the blocks of linoleum, pausing mid-story to fuss me out of her way. She had a subtle way of pitching them against us, though even then I think I knew she was probably as unforgiving to them as she was to us.

After this, there is a dark patch, perhaps after her mother dies. I expect they kicked her

[7] my children

out, no longer wanting the bastard spare child. I know she had to resort to living in a squatter camp. This is a particularly absent period which she never elaborates on, which, in fact, I only know of from her mention of a further loss. She tells us that her ID book was stolen there, taken from her shack, this along with other relics from her mother and employers. Considering the reigning poverty and the impossibility of locked doors and fences within the larger fenced-off area, personal property was a practical impossibility.

The fact that she was no longer in possession of an ID made her particularly wary of the authorities. I did not understand this then, the relevance of this lost piece of paper, but in all likelihood, she was reliving anxiety from the days of pass laws. Papers mattered in those days, and despite increasing attitudes to the contrary, they still do.

Years later, I find it wretchedly apt that the only document that confirmed her identity and nationality should be stolen from her makeshift property, from the negligible piece of land that she was to "squat" but not sit complacently on. She would go for all intents and purposes undocumented in the land she was born, afloat, not connected to the earth by a single piece of evidence.

Perhaps that's all this account will finally aspire to, a collection of evidence, recording the life that will otherwise be lost, buried in unmarked soil that will not remember her. One misgiving being just this: I cannot imagine her caring less, in fact, about being immortalised in a distant paper world, however favourably. The truth, which she did not tell many people, not even me, but which I knew anyway, was that she could not read.

I remember her only attempt to undertake the intimidating application process for a new ID. It was at my mother's urging, and she agreed only after an extended period of cajoling. For the application she needed her birth certificate, and this all-important document was in possession of her mother's old employers.

I remember the story of her visit to her people well, the woman who received her like a guest in a flowered church dress. Why is it I remember that dress so well? Large and amorphous, populated with red, blue, and white specks representing flowers, hasty dashes for stems,

recognising the pattern because my mother had something similar. I see her immense arms swaying behind the kitchen partition. I see the smile stretched on her round face made rounder by a helmet of cropped hair. It's too fixed, infuriatingly so, not leaving her face when she looks up exaggeratedly stunned, almost beaming now at some remark of Johanna's.

She took me with her. Of course she did. I would have been invaluable under the circumstances, the *dominee's* little girl. I remember her grooming me, pulling ponytails, fastening clasps and clips. It was particularly out of character for Johanna to be doing this, to be touching me at all, and I felt our relationship changed for an irregular moment. She fussed, serious, as if what she was doing was an obligation, but I was perfectly aware she only bothered now because she wanted to show me off. She was rough and impatient, but for an inexpressible reason, I enjoyed the feeling, the smell of her talcum-powdered skin, sun-warmed mounds of earth pressing against me from underneath an elastic sports bra, raw cotton dress, the smoky medicinal smell of her breath, and something else, something metallic I can't locate. I relaxed my head to the sound of her rant, her voice vibrating pleasantly against the roof of my skull. While we stood struggling on her *stoep* in the morning light, I tuned out, secretly enjoying the prolonged moment. Her voice was different that day, something more natural than her usual superior tone, lower, plainer, with more breath. She must have been nervous after all those years. And I had somehow ended up the only thing that lay between then and now, all she had to show for the interceding years of her life.

We rode there on bicycle, me on my pink Nishiki, and Johanna on her nameless wonder with the low crossbar that resembled something from the 1950s. Once a security guard at the 7-Eleven stopped her and asked where she'd gotten it. (You could tell what he thought from his up and down, slightly longing looks.) She informed him "it was a gift", not stopping to tell the story of Dawn, her most beloved employer, who'd died of cancer (mentioned without fail each time she took the Dawn cream from the dresser: "Dawn, for my sunshine, Dawn").

"We're here," she announced as she dismounted from her bike. She had a way of flipping her leg over the crossbar and coasting the last meters standing astride one pedal before making a little runway landing on the sidewalk. I was surprised by how close they lived. I could have

sworn she'd mentioned a train station, and I'd pictured a dirt track, but perhaps I'd seen one too many episodes of *Ballade vir ´n Enkeling*[8].

She hadn't revealed much about who we were meeting. The names she dropped (Linda, Tertius, Jacques-jie) had formed a web of incestuous connections, and I didn't know sister from mother, brother from uncle, only who was preferable to whom (Jacques to Tertius) and that one (Jacques) was preferable above all others. Even that was a hazy kind of knowledge, and I suspect my wandering attention was to blame.

Given that I was expecting a clan, I was surprised when a lone middle-aged woman answered the door. "Come in, come in," she said, motioning us inside between sniffling dogs. She led us down a musty passage to the living room, distinct from the informal lounge we'd passed through (I registered plastic coverlets on checkered sofas). The dogs were the kind of medium-sized terriers that choked on their own spittle and wouldn't leave Johanna alone. "Dingo, Mischka, down!" the woman called without making a move to intervene. "Don't you remember Johanna?" she coddled. I realised Johanna must have once lived with these terrors. Somehow she managed to keep them at arm's length, fending off leaps and lunges from alternating directions, but by the time the woman ushered them to the yard, Johanna was visibly shaken. "Make yourselves comfortable. I'll be right back" the woman chimed before disappearing behind a partition.

We were left silent, perched beside each other on a furry chaise-longue. We didn't utter a word between us. Johanna sat with her legs together and her hands on her knees (something about her posture said she could get up at any moment), and I mimicked her pose but felt a little resentful that she'd brought me to this place where we were clearly imposters. She kept her gaze low, but I caught her eye, and something in my face must have made her reassure me: "Not long now."

"So this is the *dominee's* little girl!" the woman exclaimed when she returned with a tray of tea for her and Johanna and cooldrink and biscuits for me. It struck me, not for the first time, that Johanna was the only maid a white woman would serve like this, and I felt a little pride at this

[8] Directly translated as "Ballad for a Loner". Afrikaans television series from the 1980s about a wandering vagabond who often walked the train tracks.

realisation. She was a walking exception.

The woman looked like a "Babsie" – the archetypal bullfrog lady – all soft bosom and drooping neck. Babsie was what I considered a particularly revolting name, a fat name, a ditz name, a name I could spit out and recoil with a shudder, a name well suited to corpulent Afrikaner women who were overly exuberant, as if they rather thought of themselves as sensual or curvaceous. Women who loved their ugly beauty spots.

She was making a big fuss with the tray of tea, meting out milk and sugar, seeming to relish the role reversal. When Johanna took in excess of two spoons of sugar, she chided her with a little click of the tongue. I sat more or less contentedly munching on the plate of biscuits, *Romany Creams*, Johanna's favourite, alongside her beloved lemon creams, though she didn't venture one now. She was far more formal than I expected, almost demure.

After a long silence sipping their tea: "How are the children?"

"Ag you know, Jacques has a new motorcycle. He'll kill himself with those things…"

Johanna nodded sagely. I realised the woman was likely the mother of the Linda–Tertius–Jacques-tjie trio.

As the visit dragged on, and the Babsie-woman perhaps realised I was only a child, no third party who warranted a show, a patronising dynamic emerged, so well-oiled it was as if something hinged into place. She became familiar in that affectionate way I had witnessed with my mother. She called her "Plummie", at which I flinched, immediately taking Johanna's side that there was an enemy of sorts: "How are they treating you, eh, Plummie?"

When we got to the matter of the birth certificate, the woman withheld it, claiming it was lost in family clutter amassed over the years. There was plenty of fake, flustered, put-out searching in an overstuffed cupboard which caused an avalanche of useless objects, but in the end, she pulled up her shoulders, gesturing carelessly with too-hasty exasperation (that was really exasperation that Johanna wanted anything from her at all), absolving herself by claiming all-encompassing ignorance of her mother's and Johanna's mother's affairs. When Johanna revealed perhaps too much of her disappointment, the woman's smile shifted, and it all came rather sourly down to her express and enthusiastic refusal of any responsibility for the misplaced

thing. Johanna didn't argue, too formal, too polite, and still at their mercy, this time – it does not escape me – for the only remaining proof of her birth, her name.

Plum…

To this day, I have no idea about the origins of this strange but ever-present nickname. Even though she liked it, said some of her employers called her by it, we never did. In the beginning, it simply seemed like unbidden territory, belonging to the past. Nor were we invited by her to use it, but after years of living so closely together, we never got the hang of it, our relationship maintaining a channel of space as if a margin spanned there, keeping us a measured distance apart.

This margin would have been invisible to the untrained eye, a perfunctory habit, the faint red margin at the edge of school books or worse: the middle gap, the binding our writing hands were not to venture over. There was the hyphen, the joining appendage meant to remedy such situations, ignorable to the reader but irrepressibly still there, slicing the aborted word in two.

A world full of hyphens between people. The distance between me and Johanna the same, in practical terms, as the respectful formality between people when they say, *Ekskuus tog*, or *Verskoon my*,[9] markers like the markings separating vehicles in the street, to indicate space, to be uttered in acknowledgement of someone's space (getting too close) or for leaving someone's space when you no longer wished to be there or, less frequently when you had a bodily mishap and thus intruded on someone else's quality of space or air (as Tannie Marie did without excusing herself). The sudden formal distance between people when they uttered these phrases was the same as the more permanent space between Johanna and I and though the chill had deeper more enduring roots it went disguised as something very civil.

So the margin kept in place, overlooked, invisible, but regulating our behaviour down a crisp linguistic edge, and for this reason, I did not mind saying my pleases and thank yous, but the margin would not allow for nicknames, would render the adoption of such intimacies terribly

[9] Excuse me, pardon me

embarrassing.

Perhaps Plum would always stay alien to us, on the other side of a wall – the vibacrete around the backyard. Our backyard that was always more hers than ours. What I find strange now: those three tall plum trees – the only trees but for a small fig tree, barely a bush – and the potted ferns and flowers she brought with her and exhibited on her *stoep*. As if the ground had been marked for her long before she and her portable pot plants ever came.

We rode our bicycles away in silence. If she was sorry or embarrassed we'd gone, she expressed it with uncharacteristic silence. If I'd picked up that the woman was different than I'd been led to believe, I knew not to say so. There was only the unspoken knowledge that strained between us: I'd seen where she came from.

We rode fast, intent, the hiss of soft tyre on hot tar filling my ears. We hissed through run-off hose water from someone's garden (it would have been sweet and lukewarm if I sucked it from the rubber pipe), through overripe berries littering shaded roadside, violently squashing them in our accelerated path. We anticipated each bump, each rough gravel patch, with our entire physique, as if the smooth aluminium struts of our bikes were indivisible extensions of our joints and limbs. She rode up front, with me tagging behind (it made me nervous to ride side by side illegally, and truth be told, I struggled to keep up with her), and I followed the meandering line her wet tyre made on the tar, aiming to ride in it, retrace it. The faint overlapping trace in our wake, the only message between us, would fade and disappear before anyone saw it.

After a few fast blocks, we seemed to become lighter, perhaps leaving that unpleasantness behind in the dank old house which receded, unseen, smaller and smaller behind us now, pushed away with each thrust and rotation of our feet. And suddenly we were just riding in the familiar morning shade, under heavy overhanging jungle trees, splashing water in theatrical jet-stream arcs, popping fat berries littering the road, riding in big, snaking loops with not a car in sight. This was freedom. The day stretched out before us as we returned to our playground, our home: the neighbourhood.

Part 2:

The Neighbourhood

Chapter 3: The Church Grounds

To anyone else, perhaps an outsider, the neighbourhood, an old suburban area north of the shore and some way behind the hilly beach-view ascensions, might have looked like an ordinary, even dreary, accumulation of blocks: a flat sprawl of plots, fences, edges of grass, tended flower beds, everything neat and middleclass but for the very slight yellowing and drying here and there in the way that small, quaint places, perhaps merely holiday towns to these other people, betray their inhabitants' best efforts. This might have been more obvious, the weeds and dry grass, the general sea-worn look of everything manmade, even the man-planted plants (chiefly palm trees, unconvincing to begin with) in the white-grey glare of windy off-season days, days that people there liked to ignore for not supporting their idea of what a pleasant place it was they lived. It could, in fact, go entirely unnoticed by inhabitants and casual observers alike – consuming ice cream on slow scenic drives – the subtle sorrowful lilt to the place, the built-in feeling that the neighbourhood was occupying space in the past.

Back then, the Strand[10], was still considered a place where old people came to retire but it was also steadily turning into the kind of town where young families came to set up home, where due to economic conditions they could better afford to settle into the Afrikaner dream. This picture of domestic bliss was not that different from the American dream, with lawnmowers and Sunday *braais* and church drives, bazaars to us, that residents everywhere called "community involvement" (which really meant giving away their second-hand clothes and cans of beans). But in our country even uselessly spare goods preferably and more freely went to poor whites, and only after that, once the farm family had been considered, the unwanted things would become "charity" awarded to gardeners or maids close at hand. My mother would nearly cry when she saw white men begging and once she let one into the house to take a bath.

For us this coastal white neighbourhood would not turn out as neutral and safe as it appeared and was perhaps intended by its founders. For us it would hold both danger and

[10] A suburb on the eastern edge of False Bay, about 50 km southeast of Cape Town.

possibility in roughly equal measures, as a lot of things in the world do, and should do, though previous generations seemed to feel differently. But despite their original efforts and the dutiful maintenance of subsequent generations, the neighbourhood's worn face, its kept gardens, its hosed-down driveways, sidewalks and streets (with accumulating spit stains and dark bubble gum blotches) would reveal perhaps more than children should know, more than the occasional sting from gravel sloughed knees and hands. Its surfaces were always somehow *too* sure (the way the film over pool of quicksand obscures the sluggish pull below), offering an irresistible draw to the keen acuity a child's perception has for contradiction.

This slightly "off" edge to neighbourhood houses, especially where inhabitants aged along with their property, was only perceptible with a fresh eye (a practical rarity for a closed community) but for guileless children the practically ancient look to things struck us as inherently odd, not the aging decaying aspect by itself, but the way things simply were, their contours, their arches, as if pretending to eternal existence (despite worn humble finishes). It was this incongruent sense of history which made things interesting, which seemed to gesture to some obscured unintelligible mystery from the past, revealing itself only in cracks and through keyholes. Its missteps and malfunctions would provide an endless supply of mysteries and intrigue while its steady decay continued to dissolve the obvious borders of what was possible, perhaps even blurring what was forbidden.

As we saw it, the neighbourhood *began* on the church grounds. The gardens, parking lot, and structures: offices, classrooms, halls, all linked by intersecting walkways and corridors and spaced at intervals around the church. In front, a stained-glass triangle depicted an indiscernible Bible scene in smaller Picasso triangles, and a walled incline led up to varnished double-doors – latched with a horizontal gold bar, only negligibly tarnished. This was where our domain ended. But the rest, the grounds, the entrance way (which made for excellent bicycling territory), these were ours for the taking.

Off centre, and most impressive, was the tallest thing we'd ever seen, the outline of a dagger culminating smoothly, endlessly into an all-piercing point. Underneath it was a hollow, a bell, and a ladder leading up we couldn't fathom anyone brave enough to climb.

Lucky for us, the bell could be reached by a coil of rope that trailed onto the grass, moving only slightly, inconspicuously in the breeze. Lying on that grassy patch and looking up was enough to inspire a thrilling combination of awe and terror, especially if the clouds were moving. The whole thing would shift with dizzying instability and would surely come down: *The sky is falling!*

We'd ring that trilling bell, galling every dog owner for thirty blocks, and run to hide from the *koster*, the man in charge, his glasses rimmed with stern black lines. And one day, we found a way onto the roof, onto a corridor of roofs, to discover a whole new world – all ours – a maze of shortcuts and hideouts above the order of passages.

Yes, for us, everything began there. The church grounds were the exact entry point, and therefore, in our egocentric children's minds, it formed the centre, the nucleus. It would also become the rabbit hole through which we could step out of ourselves, out from under the watchful gaze of our parents into the world of others, the *real* world (unlikely as this may have been at that point in national history).

All of this, lush trees and green pastures, so ambitiously captured and mirrored and lit up, maintained by an unseen workforce, presided over by the *koster* (no more than a glorified janitor but our enemy from the very first). All of this, waiting just outside the loose jangling, clicking, unclicking of our garden gate.

The neighbourhood extended from this central block outwards in all directions as far as we dared to bicycle, and let it be said that we were daring. But first, it should be established that this magnificent stretch of playground was shared in ownership by us, my two younger brothers and I, and the neighbouring boys across the road, this owing to the sacred law of "finders-keepers" and following our children's colonisation of it with stick swords.

It was during our exploration of this new land, in particular a tree we'd never climbed before, that two boys wandered outside with the same idea. We were not yet sure how we felt about sharing our playground with strange children, but after a rudimentary exchange at the thick base of the tree, we found out, firstly, that they were the same age as us (the older Coenie was my

age, and Jaco the same as my brother Constant) and secondly, that we were to go to the same school. Following these children's preliminaries, we played with our little stick swords, staging an epic battle, and thereafter became friends (Coenie and I were also married for a week after this).

In the way that only beginnings are remembered, I still remember the first order of business. We built a tree den, hiding treasures (sweets) in nooks and hanging shreds of fabric, flags. Of course we had to build accompanying booby traps (sprinkled thorns, pulled-back branches that would slap you in the face if you trod across an invisible piece of yarn) to safeguard our treasure from other kids. After all, it was disputable, according to my father, whether our tree – by then known simply as "the Tree" – lay within the border of our property (which was really the church's property). When we asked, he would maintain that the block of growth between our fence and the parking lot was really part of our *pastorie* property, that the iron fence would have been extended around it had the tree not grown so thick and wildly out of bounds.

And so, we would be especially annoyed when unfamiliar children came to play there, climbing in our branches while their pram-pushing mothers looked on. But on occasion, perhaps getting used to them, we might decide to let the new kids play along, and depending how often we saw them, they might be accepted into the group. If they were the kind that came alone, that is, we did not play with babyish kids. This was a condition we came to loathe, in others, in ourselves, playing with Coenie and Jaco – Coenie having a severe bullying streak and Jaco being a little daredevil. They claimed their father beat them with a "sjambok", but at that stage, we weren't even sure what that was.

Undeniably a certain hardness crept into us while playing with Coenie and Jaco, perhaps as early as Johanna. Maybe it had been there all along, dormant in our babydom, teased out by those that mirrored the same gene. We were fighting cubs, preparing for the jungle, for predators, for prey, having only wanted a pack to roam with, with whom to avoid direct culpability.

Eventually practically all the neighbourhood kids became part of this pack, which included Johanna. We played together after school, on weekends, and during holidays, and the church grounds, specifically the Tree, became the central convening place where kids from all over the neighbourhood gathered like the lost boys from Peter Pan. If we were the lost, orphaned

children in an unfeasible Neverland, Johanna was Peter Pan, teaching us to soar above the suburban ground.

Chapter 4: The Tree

The Tree was a prehistoric-looking thing, a thick twisted snake that lay partially on its side and shot up at different angles, sometimes to great heights (Jaco claimed he could see the ocean from where he climbed), while, at other places, the branches could no longer support their own weight and curved elastically to shade the parking lot. Really it was many trees springing from one fat horizontal tree, the reclining earth mother of all trees. We would sometimes cruelly scrape and prod at its dull bark – with sticks of its own progeny, no doubt – to see if it still had life in it. The gum and red-brown sap, flowing sometimes for days, always astounded us.

Comprised of odd curves and inclines, it seemed to us like a giant stationary rollercoaster or immense jungle gym, with wayward rails, pliable branches used as swings or slides. Sometimes it was a house with seats, beds, rooms with views; other times, it was a plane or spaceship as we waved in the high branches on swaying puffs of tiny feathered leaves. There were plenty of wild windy days when we could barely hear each other's shouts over the old tree's creaking and singing. On these days, you could really get lost up there. Going back inside, it was as if you'd been in a war, and the stillness of oblivious carpets and sofas would seem unreal.

Next to the Tree there grew a similar but somewhat narrower auxiliary tree. It did not twist on its side but shot to exploratory heights, higher than the Tree, as if compensating for its comparative lack of girth. It was more challenging to climb, but once we learned how, it was beneficial, since this tree linked up with the Tree and other trees in our garden, forming, only in the loftiest heights, a latticework of branches and leaves. We could thus seamlessly traverse from our garden to the outside world through a causeway of arches and "elevators" – branches elastic

enough to bend down before snapping back to their original position. Or if returning home, we could snap down on our lawn as if we'd been teleported back from space.

Even as we were mastering the landscape, we were finding that there was a finite number of crevices, dens, and hiding places, even on such a large piece of land. Eventually we would know them all, and games would grow predictable, pointless. Every child knows there is no greater terror than boredom. (What is the world to a child but a series of games obstructed solely by parents and the rules?) The idea of having nothing to do with free time, this kind of empty possibility stretching out, it borders on a child's version of existential anxiety. There is a reason corporal punishment had been replaced with detention, though you still got the odd smack with a ruler from an old-fashioned schoolmarm.

Of course the ingenuity of childhood, perhaps only beginning to be replaced by the ingenuity of technology, prevented us from feeling the full force of this empty hopeless dilation of time. But I could always sense the tip of something threatening to break through – the tip of something terrible under the domestic sprawl of houses and chimneys and grass, (a seam in the underlying earth's crust, one dormant fissure, could shatter it all!). And perhaps this is why when alone or with others, when I got this feeling, it would send me, the little leader, into a scramble for a picture of what to do, what to build, what to plan, what mission to embark on – always collectively, convincingly, elaborately – fantasies really, perhaps only an alternative to the one I sensed we were living.

So, we extended our reach up new invisible-from-the-ground heights in trees, invented new games, or complicated old ones. Old games like hide-and-seek were made more mobile, where we could run around the church, the landscape forming a continuous path around so you could double back on the seeker creeping stealthily up behind. This made multiple hiding places possible in hurried exchanges. We also extended the game and made it increasingly difficult for the seeker by requiring that he find all the hiders and keep them in captivity, from which one could, of course, escape to hide again. But even this game (called "five fingers" for reasons no one could remember), with its many novel possibilities, eventually grew sour when it became impossible to keep track of all the players.

To complicate matters further, we began to cheat, first, by hiding just outside the

demarcated playing field, behind Tannie Villeria's low brick wall which quaintly and quite inanely cordoned off her crooked fairy tale house that leaned slightly to the side (obvious from inside her corridors that drooped quite noticeably up their length), but soon we were crossing the street to hide in the bicycle racks behind the Sunday school rooms. And still we grew so callous with boredom we would leave whoever was searching and go inside to watch cartoons.

This tendency to dissatisfaction would propel us to the furthest reaches of the neighbourhood, exploring, scouting, searching the surrounding blocks for… *something*. And though we were to discover a lot of things, that first elusive something was never anything specific, not a thing that could be touched and claimed but prompted by a more general lack in the surfaces of things at home – that mysterious something present in life at its most fragile and honest and unrepressed. Though we went looking for that candid living in the most contrived fantasies, learning living from movies and popular culture. Of course, our sudden lust for adventure may have had something to do with our acquisition of new second-hand bicycles.

Chapter 5: The Surroundings

Our parents let us run wild. We had free reign of streets and blocks as long as we came home before it got properly dark. And so, we roamed free and increasingly found ourselves privy to small irregularities in our surroundings. We claimed these things, things our parents and adults seemed not to want us to have but to which we felt entitled for outsmarting them, as small opportunities. Whether real or entirely dreamt up, we became incapable of telling the difference: when we played in the neighbourhood, nothing was impossible.

We found the landscape could be transformed overnight. Cracks and caved-in gaps (in concrete as in any ancient thing) could radically alter demarcation, old borders could become new habitation – if a crevice or hole opened up and was judged wide enough for our heads to fit

through, we would stick ourselves in there. Fruit spilling over neighbours' walls were ours for the taking, as were seasonal berries or nuts within our reach – these could mean feasts or, if overripe or in excess, ammunition for wars.

Lush bushes became dens, and we carved tunnels in our newly discovered jungle paradise. Leaked water from overgrown gutter systems were occasion for miniature boat races or fishing along elaborate riverside trails – Coenie and Jaco's dog Caesar spurring us on, pacing and biting into the murky depths until we fully believed he would seize wriggling fish flesh. Of course the converse was also true: felled trees, even one branch, could mean the annihilation of whole imaginary worlds – open air where there had once been a snug domestic arrangement of "seats" – or the severance of the spaceship "control seat", with knobs and levers polished with use.

And this was how we came to hate certain people for robbing us of what we believed was ours. We resented and scolded the workers: Edward, the gardener, and indeed the only black person I knew, his name perhaps originally heard as something rhyming with "dimwit" and henceforth (quite unwittingly) pronounced "Et-wit". When we found him, this middle-aged boy, outside the worker's shack making a funny smelling stew he was unperturbed. We couldn't blame him for carrying out orders. And so, the *koster*, with his authoritative bunch of jangling keys, was made our more culpable foe.

The further our exploration extended from home, the more mysterious and interesting the world seemed to become. We explored new blocks on bicycle, a pack of us, my cousin perched on a pillow attached to my crossbar, Johanna riding in front, sometimes with our dog Tootsie in her backpack. We were like the *Famous Five* except there were more of us and we didn't have to be home in time for tea.

We would find new hideouts: construction sites, maintenance openings, worker's shacks, grassy inclines (for box races), enemies (obnoxious farm children visiting their grandmothers) and abandoned parks (newly mapped-out playing fields). One grassy expanse was empty but for a large rusty sphere, a jungle gym hailed from the gods, Ozymandias, King of Kings, sticking

sorely out of the weeds. "*Look on my Works ye Mighty, and despair!*"

We were coming up with things from nowhere: "inventions", most often vehicles or contraptions from scrapyard junk – the dubious raft to cross the Laurens river, the reconstructed motorcycle that never was – though we were happy to attach playing cards to the spokes of our bikes for the engine rattling effect. More successful were our forays into immobile structures: tree houses, dens, forts, Indian tepees constructed on dusty desert ground with makeshift Stone Age tools. We particularly liked holing up when it rained or when we were in some contrived war with slingshots. We travelled to dinosaur lands in cardboard time machines and once picked the lock to get into the Sunday school rooms – after days of keyhole peering, we had convinced ourselves there was a "conspiracy" going on.

There were the top secret clubs with clubhouses and banners and whispered meetings in bicycle racks, the buried alien messages recorded with funny voices on cassette tape, and the time we made arch-enemies with farm children and initiated a war that spanned years. There were the journeys to ghostly moors, along winding, misty riverside trails, past rushing water, past rabid dogs and madhouses, to the perilous gypsy slums (the caravan park), where we bought Wilson toffees and "nickerballs" (the American "g" switched for a "ck" for posterity).

We were drawn to institutions, to rundown, out-of-the-way places like old age homes, public lavatories, scrapyards, graveyards, caravan parks, and ACVVs for the homeless and disabled. To us, these places looked like sites for horror or suspense movies, perhaps only because they were shifted out of view of daily living and so were found fascinatingly new. Nevertheless, we imagined they were secret places where anything could happen, and in our wayward way, we were right.

Making our way into the caravan park, to the tuckshop Johanna swore was hidden inside, we encountered the people who lived there, at home, to our surprise, during the weekday hours when we assumed children – encumbered solely by feeble women's voices or by overzealous shopkeepers – ruled the world. They were sitting on the narrow stoeps of their houses – wooden, as if out of a fairy tale – everything in that encampment miniaturised and cheerful like a resort

with putt-putt courses. We had entered, we felt, illegally, past an unmanned security office and some painted wooden barge poles that we stepped over with no trouble at all. And now they glared at us, these strangers, as if we were indeed trespassing, but did not rise or make a move, complacent on their porches leaning in the mud. We walked mutely, deferring to Johanna, who seemed to know her way around, and took in covert glances of house interiors and children on tricycles with squeaking wheels.

This place apart in the middle of the woods standing still – and still we couldn't quite believe these people lived here, clearly white but also uglier. Their skin colour itself was troubling, the brown-skinned tan of leather – or dirt – sun-baked enough (I guessed) to form those little creases along the eyes when chimneysweeps emerged achooing from their charge.

For some reason, ever after, I assumed (conflating only very fair amounts of our parents' ideas) that this was the place where sporadic house guest, Racheltjie (folds of her deformity swaddled in oriental fabric) and Koekoes *gat-in-die-grond-pampoenkos*,[11] with his continually working jaw, lived. He who made a point of visiting my father and every other *dominee* within bicycling distance on their birthday, being in it entirely for the baked goods.

Being the eldest, the initiation, the organisation of these missions, these schemes, was left to me. I became the unacknowledged leader, the boys cooperating fitfully, as if only for the duration of their amusement. But I hardly noticed, seizing the opportunity to have the pictures in my head realised collectively – though fully realised, they seldom were. I found myself the zealous instigator, cajoling and motivating the others with all the vigour and presumption of a born-again missionary stirring up the natives. I couldn't understand it, how the boys were happy to run around the same games, the same *aan-aan* circles, and though they were frequently reluctant, I imagined they were happy to have a more focused goal.

Anything worth embarking on, I felt, had to have an element of the impossible or unlikely, the vast mysterious allure of that which is out of reach. Children like me are born to fall out of our mothers, through the fingers of our fathers to the solid ground below – "come back to

[11] hole-in-the-ground-pumpkin-food (direct translation)

earth", they kept saying, if only I'd listened.

But *I* wanted the impossible in its many seductive guises. We had only to believe in it to make it so, though the others became frustrated when I convinced them to believe only for nothing to manifest. But if we built the spaceship, built it believing it would work in the end, the end didn't really matter while we were doing it. (If more than one person believes in the same fantasy, does it not cease to be fantasy at all?)

So I continued to look silly when I took my contraptions out into the sharp focus of day, and I would be the last one standing against the farm kids in the end, not farm kids at all, it turned out, but children from Johannesburg. I remained committed, a captain going down with the (*space*) ship, unwilling to yield or compromise my own rules. That would mean losing the whole feeling. I didn't realise that "the feeling", perhaps not far removed from something common like togetherness, was lost the moment I was rejected by the others. They had switched sides to join the "farm" children. Holding fast to the disintegrating impossible, I had alienated them. I, the eldest, had become I, the leader, and finally I, the dictator, and boys did not have to endure bullying from girls…

When Johanna played with us, she became the eldest. Biking along on adventures, climbing in trees, we did not mind these oddities, welcoming a grownup into our world. How were we to know that she was a landmine, so well placed (immune to every harmful stereotype, the routine admonitions of parents) that we would be oblivious staring her naked rage in the face?

The thing I'd learnt with being the leader was you couldn't hold onto the position for too long. At some point, the natives would grow restless, deviate from the rules and lose sight of the goal. This happened to her too, but she didn't merely sulk and slam doors; she would do outrageous things like throw whole bricks.

To be fair, there was once when I got just as mad, and though mine was only half a brick, it did not miss (I later told myself I'd aimed for the shins). And though the boy's father came out of the house, inexplicably, I did not get into any trouble.

This is what we shared and did not share. A neighbourhood. A childhood. And she was still, would always be, a child, looking for her playground, her stretch of earth. She had thought

she’d found it with us.

Part 3

The Street

Chapter 6: Sweets

At the end of each week, our parents would hand over an invariable number of silver rands – pocket money – for sweets. And so, the highlight of our week would come, riding our bikes to the bottom of the street to the neighbourhood 7-Eleven. It was a long street with an assortment of houses and types of people living in them, and the atmosphere seemed almost to change as we pedalled through certain sections.

The middle section was my favourite: a short stretch about halfway from our house to our destination, apparently exclusively inhabited by happy young families. It was idyllic. Trees lined the sidewalk, adults washed cars in driveways, children played cricket on front lawns. There was face-brick everywhere. It had a holiday feel to it, a kind of communal anticipation, and though the kids were babyish, I wished I was a part of it.

The middle was the only section of street I perceived as plainly cohesive. Further down, it grew more haphazard. There were historic houses with gables and ancient gardens, with dirty porches encased in the cross-stitches of trellis doors or burglar bars ("Beware the dog" signs above gates, whether strictly true or not). There were houses with impossible velvet grass and the open faces of flowers in beddings arranged by hue, edges so crisp against the sidewalk they needed no fence. These were houses where doorbells played little tunes behind blurry glass and where architectural flourishes like circle windows or edged chimneys settled into quaintness with or without their occupants' permission.

That Friday, I planned to buy only animal-shaped sweets and to make a little zoo display before I ate them. It had started out as one of those still grey days that people ignore indoors, days in suspension as if they too lay in wait for something other than themselves. I was glad for something to pick up my mood, for a little plan that did not rely on the indistinct weather (which seemed only to promote uncertain feelings and lying down). Coming up with things outside did not feel possible; the others hadn't even bothered coming out. And when, by the afternoon, the

wind picked up, I knew it was a lost cause.

Early in the day, we had asked Johanna if she wanted to come along (we'd learnt to invite her places, to offer her food, and to generally consider her politely in all things). To our dismay, she wanted to buy cigarettes, and this meant we'd have to wait for her to finish some section of her work. She made me help take the sheets from the line, and my eyes watered from the white light all around, the backyard cement reflecting it on all sides. In the washroom, I was awkward holding the corners of white or flowered sheets, slow to anticipate her bold, ritualistic movements. She took her time, exerting power over us with each unfinished chore. Before we left, she insisted on fitting the dog – mutely acquiescent by now – into her rucksack. Then, with the clinking of keys and collars and zippers, we were off.

By the time we left, it had become immensely windy, as it sometimes did in that town, but this only spurred us on. We pedalled hard, more intent on our destination than the trip, the neighbourhood houses little more than a windy blur. Near the end of the road, a drizzle separated itself from the grey, and by the time we were negotiating the last curves and bumps across an abandoned parking lot, it was raining heavily. We reached the shop and took hurried shelter, laughing as we scampered – this was nothing unusual for us, we often played in the rain and boasted that we relished getting wet.

Inside, we nevertheless relaxed, separating without a thought to getting home. Johanna turned in some glass Coke bottles (which could be exchanged for 50c) and talked to the girl behind the till while we went about our selection, making precise little mental calculations to ensure we didn't exceed our limited sum nor waste a cent.

I still remember the dusty artificial smell of sherbet all along the front aisles where the candy and sweets were exhibited, the purple granadilla-flavoured cartons from China with protruding straws that would block and unblock in a choking burst of acid powder. This 7-Eleven (being only a block away from the primary school) had ample reserves of novelty sweets.

There were candy cigarettes with red-stained tips in dangerous-looking cardboard packs with skull and crossbones or Cool Hand Luke, cartons housing candy sticks or lollipops

brandishing the detached faces of cats and bears – Yogi, Top Cat, Sylvester – the whole insane gang boasting transfer tattoos included in packs. But we were not impressed by obvious gimmicks, these brands being too expensive for the sweets you ended up with. At the other end of the spectrum, there were loose sweets: Wilson toffees in a mélange of flavours, including Coca-Cola, toffees so hard they could glue your jaws shut. But these were sweets from our parents' day, sold by the penny and stored in jars, hard sweets like nickerballs rarely found outside tuck shops.

Of course, we loved bubble gum for its durability. There were the standard fail-safe Chappies, green mint, purple grape, and yellow, a wildcard – I shied away from these to avoid the catastrophe of a sickly pink melon flavour. There were Chappie sticks if you wanted to buy in bulk and Bubbaloo's, a new gum-cum-candy that we loved but which cost three times more than Chappies for its gooey centre. There were the viciously named "jawbreakers" which secretly terrified me because they were so unmanageably large in the mouth: a slippery pool ball. I was afraid it would slip and lodge itself firmly in the corner pocket at the back of my throat. A new product we were especially keen on were Fireballs. Smaller than jawbreakers and a variation on colour-changing nickerballs, they scorched your mouth with overpowering cinnamon. They were not necessarily delicious, but there was the final relief of the soothing fruity centre (fruity in a way that was nothing at all like real fruit). They were also a bargain for longevity, and we would work them down to interesting blotchy colours that we nudged each other to look at. There were countless others: gummy watches, marshmallow fish, candy necklaces, love hearts, dummies, liquorice strings, powder pellets resembling pills, toothpaste tubes filled with condensed milk, gummy burgers, fudge, or, for a healthy alternative, toffee apples.

The last interested us not at all. As with a lot of things that were slightly hazardous, the sweets that courted our interest had the dusty, travel-worn look of things that came from China. The air of unfamiliarity, the same slightly dangerous allure as computer or TV games emerging around that time, with serpentine villains and shrouded film-noir streets – with back alleys where the fluorescent Chinatowns, the downtown strip clubs could be found – like TV shows, or the comic books my brothers read, featuring darting angular characters, reptilian things that spilled out of sewers, ninja turtles and heroes with dinosaur alter egos, or the edgier, more American

brand, characters from Gotham city, where closures were seldom final and the villains, with jagged scars and two faces, were duplicitous – had multiple mad facets – and gestured with disquiet to terrible things beyond my understanding. These were not the comics of my father's childhood, the round-faced Archie comics he stored by the boxful in the garage. The sweets reminded me of the fireworks we bought in the Deep Blue (they had the same sandy feel) and of the arcade games you could play there for 50c.

The first time I played, it was at Johanna's urging. It was just like her to want to try something herself only to put us up to it instead. She offered to sponsor the 50c, and I slotted the money in. Before the machine kicked into gear, I proceeded to press as many simultaneous buttons as I could. The game was Japanese, with competing ninja adversaries, and I was faring well for someone just slamming buttons, but as I advanced to the end of the stage, a tribal-looking character, a witchdoctor of indiscernible ethnicity – presumably "the boss" – entered the scene. He had a native-painted face, a shaved head, and bones around his neck, and I assumed he was Indian (though from India or North America, I'd have been hard-pressed to say). Suddenly the machine began to thunder and vibrate and I heard a man chant intensely as if from very far away. Balls of fire and guttural throat sounds overwhelmed me. Thrown and unsure of what was happening, I was suddenly convinced the machine was possessed. It wasn't until my exertions ceased to have effect on the screen that it registered: I had died. Game over, it read. I was thrilled to shivering sensationalised terror. I wanted to play again, convinced there were an infinite amount of mysteries and secrets stored in the machine's boxy brain. But I would have to wait for the luxury of another disposable 50c.

There were parents who didn't let their children play these games or watch certain movies, a prominent undercurrent of parents and teachers who believed in the Rapture, who regularly spoke in tongues and saw signs from revelations. They spread rumours of sects operating in the neighbourhood, murdering cats and levitating when they played "glasie-glasie"[12]. Our parents didn't censor our games and rarely forbade us from watching movies, except the sex scenes, even kissing, whereupon the channel would be flipped with sudden scorn. My father laughed at these "charismatic" ideas but didn't take the time to explain it

[12] A local game akin to something like the Ouija board, through which contact could apparently be made with the spiritual plain.

to us: the frenetic Christians (who'd just as soon claim there were drugs in the drinking water, or once in a kind of soft drink); the women in computer games dancing on platforms revealing little tassels on their breasts; the strange stirrings, the siren feeling, mystical, powerful, you got when you saw Eastern villains; how mysterious the landscape would suddenly seem; how, programmed with limited responses, everything, including death would seem possible in these worlds.

While my brothers went for staying power, buying tubes of sucking sweets, I always chose chocolates. Even though I knew they would be finished in seconds, chocolates tasted by far the best. Sometimes I tried to eat them like Charlie from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,* bit by bit – to imagine one chocolate a year. I would commiserate with the boy and make my chocolates last for hours. But what I usually did (and did on that day) was to buy one tube of sucking sweets to last me the rest of the afternoon, usually a pack of peppermints because I liked the way they became brittle and sugary and, at the last moment, disintegrated into a melted paste.

In some ways, this was what we lived for: foreseeable pleasures that we could anticipate and plan. I realised this at one point, and in an instant, saw clearly the disheartening futility of my life. I saw how small the bit of weekly happiness I relied on was, how short-lived, and, worst of all, repetitive, cyclic. Was there nothing beyond the cycle, the school week, the play weekend, nothing outside or above. In the aftermath of polishing off my weekly rations, this would be uncomfortably clear. In that full lethargic passivity, what I had looked forward to was over, what I had to look forward to was still a week away and would lead inevitably to this feeling. It was terrifying to experience this at the beginning of life, and lonely, strangely embarrassing for its smallness though I was a child. To feel that what you desired was embarrassing and secret, hopelessly transient, and that for you there was nothing more than this.

I was to become aware of this feeling many more times in childhood, as I was in life: the pointless, closed economy of stickers, shimmery, furry, or glowing as if to distract from the fact you could do nothing with them but trade; marbles like unhatched eggs that we played only to win more; yo-yos that glowed in the dark like revolving planets but with which we never managed to do more than walk the dog or loop the loop. I started to become aware of trends that

came in phases. (All holding that Eastern promise…)

Firecrackers were different. With them, you could do a million things. There were the plots to blow up post boxes, the battles we had pitching each other with snappers, excavating ant hills like goldmines – to uproot the queen, fat, complacent, burrowed in deep (and in the process blowing up tunnels built grain for grain, frying the workers to a silver crisp). The firepower available to kids was dizzying: "cherry bombs" and "widow-makers". But even with fireworks, there was a troublesome shortness: "bang", and the longer-lasting, more colourful displays felt wasted in the yard. Destructive plots were the only answer, but sometimes we even ran out of these. There was nothing more dismal than the day after Guy Fawkes, a holiday we celebrated even though we didn't know what it was for.

One year, I did the oddest thing. I walked to the beach and picked up as many remnants of the spent firecrackers as I could carry. I saved them, empty washed-up shells, smoothing out the brittle rice paper and fire-faded graphics, smelling the exploded gunpowder: I was obsessed. In the washroom, I built a den under the metal sink: a "Fireworks Museum" displaying all the biggest and most beautiful (*empty*) firecrackers. I'd sit there for hours, smelling them, looking at their tiny drawings, trying to capture the feeling, the magic of Guy Fawkes. The burnt smell of gunpowder, like the strips of sulphurous orange aloFng matchboxes or the instant consuming sizzle when you struck a match, the speed and exciting warmth and, after, the trail of smoke you could only smell for a second. I'd invite my brothers and family to come see, try to distil the feeling in them too. You couldn't do this with real firecrackers, collect them. Eventually you'd get the irrepressible urge to blow them up. There was too much potential in their full barrels. I dissected a few of the larger-barrelled ones to try and figure out how they worked, how they produced such orchestrated displays of light and form, how whole symphonies of kaleidoscope patterns could be stored in such simple cardboard canisters. I got no closer to the essence by doing this, and after lighting some residual black powder, I gave up, stopped visiting the museum, until my mother or Johanna must have cleared it all away.

We finished our selection with me last as usual. We paid separately but handed over our change (what few cents remained) to the one behind us in queue. We left then although the rain hadn't

subsided much, Johanna with a newspaper over her head to protect her kroesies, though little beads clung to but never penetrated her hair.

After pedalling a short distance, the downpour got really ridiculous. Johanna shouted and gestured for us to follow her. She turned into the driveway of an unfamiliar house, but instead of going to the front door, she eased down a passage along the side. It felt oddly unofficial creeping into a stranger's garden like this. At the end of the path, behind the garage, stood a unit similar to the one in our backyard. The door was open, and an old woman, wrinkled and worn-out – bags somehow drooping below her cheekbones instead of her eyes – sat in the doorway, smoking tobacco. Johanna greeted her casually, as if it wasn't uncommon for her to stumble in like this. The woman got lazily up and scraped together some makeshift seating in the entrance of the room.

We sat mutely on old paint cans, staring alternately at the paisley on the peeling linoleum and the wet outside while Johanna spoke to her, her voice changing, calling her "Antie". She talked cryptically, purposefully obscure, like she sometimes did with me, a little too emphatically when Bernard, the youngest, was around and we were talking "grown-up" things. An old radio was tuned softly to an unfamiliar station which stuttered through the static. My brothers started sucking on their sweets.

I looked around, a little dismayed that I should find myself in such dingy surroundings (when I should have been at home with my purchases) and imagined that if the Tannie of the house found us there, in such a drowned-rat sorry state there would be a lot of explaining to do. And she would invite us in to sit in front of the TV, perhaps with some nice *groen koeldrank*[13] with bubbles. Perhaps she'd even phone our mother if she found out we were the *dominee's* children. This always made a difference, as if we had some passed down bit of holiness. It also gave us a bit of power, usually in the form of presented baked goods, but simultaneously a responsibility to be very polite and *ordentlik*.

In between daydreams of sweets and cooldrink, snatches of the conversation permeated:

"Antie, ou mens, wanner kry Antie die ge… die gedoente agter die blad?"

[13] Green concentrate usually diluted with water, a simple drink mostly drunk by children.

"Nee, kend [bent over coughing], Jirre weet… die jarre wat praat. Watter troos is daa vir n ou mens?"

"En die kinders? Elsie, Johnny? Waar hak die dan dat Antie so alleen sit en wegkwyn?"

"Einste kend, my eie kinners se gevrete hou hulself nou skaars. Hoe het onse Hannie gesê oor die jong klomp? Tronk is vol, maar die kerk is léég… Maar goed so né, Plummie? Ou dier was te trots…"[14]

After this, they were quiet for a long while, sucking on their cigarettes. The rain softened to a light drip and then ceased altogether. And sitting in that doorway, it was as if all of a sudden, and for the first time, I became aware of the rich greenness all around me, the glistening leaves, loamy freshness, the anticipation, the fullness of life suspended – but for an irritable bird shriek high above, seeking the echo of its own impatient cry, its only answer the dripping from a ruffled branch…

As we shuffled out, trees and bushes baptising me with fresh drops, I noticed Johanna's earnest, downcast face. I had seldom seen her look so contemplative. Riding back, the weather didn't spare us long; thunder rumbled overhead, and then the sky split open and an ocean fell out all at once: in twisted rivulets over our faces, in streams down the street. We pedalled as fast as our legs and the drowned surface would allow but lightning cracked as if next to us, and when we looked around, we saw that it *was* next to us, striking houses and gardens beside us in the street, again and again in flashing strokes. The crackling seemed to follow us up the street, and suddenly it was as if we were in a too-loud movie theatre, only what was behind the screen could and would get us, was leaping out!

I knew we were supposed to get out of water and out from under trees, but trees lined the entire middle-class street, and there was no way off the grid. Lightning continued to hit here, then there, houses beside us in the street. The spectacle was beyond anything I could have dreamed: uncanny and unreal as reality sometimes is. All bets were off, and suddenly it seemed very

[14] "Auntie, when are you going to get this business behind you?"
"No child, God only knows… the years just keep taking. What comfort is there left for an old lady?
"And the kids? Elsie, Johnny? Where did they get stuck that you have to waste away by yourself?
"Good question, my own children don't show their faces … How did Hannie always say about the youth? The prisons are full, but the church is empty. It's for the better, heh Plummie, the old animal was too proud…"

possible we might die. In the race to get home, I saw Tootsie in her backpack: sodden, beside himself. He squirmed and fell out in front of our wheels. I screamed, but even as he hit the ground, he rolled over and rose up in a sprint beside us. I continued to shriek as we pulled up to the house.

Inside the foyer, we were wound up and chatty, already uncertain about what we had experienced. We found my father in his study and recounted how close the lightning had come to us. He didn't look as impressed as we felt he should be. But it was "right next to us", we persisted. Smiling his placid smile, he both humoured and assuaged our fears: our rubber tires, they would have saved us.

And God wouldn't hurt his little children…

But why is it I remembered an Afrikaans poet ("O die Bliksemgedagte"[15]), bespectacled and kind, a *dominee* himself, the name odd – a single word with a reverend sound – who wrote mournful but respectful poems to God following the loss of his children, one of them, a little girl, struck down by lightning.

I felt my chocolates burn the inside of my pockets, and forgot all about the miraculous weather, the old lady (somehow connected to the weather in my mind), the fear I had experienced, more immediate but less terrifying than the images I conjured falling asleep, fading by the minute as I thought how I would arrange my sweets in a bowl like the top of a nicely decorated birthday cake, how I would eat them bit by bit in a secret place, perhaps behind the stately old piano while the rain beat down outside – as if from far, far away on the other side of the panes of blurry glass.

That night I dream of Tannie Villeria, the lady in the crooked house, Tannie *Stofsuier*[16] to Johanna, for she borrowed her vacuum each time ours broke. It is perhaps my first articulable nightmare, the first in a series of old-lady dreams.

[15] "O, the thunderbolt-thought", verse from Afrikaans poet Totius's poem *O die pyn-gedagte*.
[16] Aunt Vacuum

She comes out of my father's study, exiting onto the cement steps, the officious rosebush-lined pathway outside the door, her back turned to the neat rectangular buzzer that shakes the entire house with a shrill screech from some ancient unlocatable amplifier for as long as it is held in. It's dark, but it's all there, every detail in stark realism, but infinitely stranger for the stillness that touches everything, even the sounds themselves: the monotone shhhhh of a chorus of crickets masquerading for silence like the steady hum of a refrigerator, the domestic sounds of my father opening the stiff jamb of the door, the snagging slide of lace curtain: the rapid clack-clack-clack of old-lady heels crushing the underfoot concrete before halting in their tracks about midway down the path. Something has caught her eye. She pauses, and lost suddenly to all decorum – absurdly – tilts her head to the sky. She gapes up, neck at an impossible angle—

And seeing something there, something behind the smattering of stars perhaps, something vast and alien and shattering – perhaps the sky is finally coming down – shrieks a peal of horror, piercing, not wholly unlike the buzzer. But before her vocalisation can be made complete, something in her releases: her lone coiffed figure makes a terrible arc for the concrete…

The interruption of waking does little to quell the terror, which I experience for myself unfinished on the bedroom floor. It lends her cry a short, resounding, most eternal quality that I can hear into the next day.

Chapter 7: Tannie Marie

A little way down our street, there lived a really old lady, another Tannie Marie, though we didn't joke about her as we did Johanna's Tannie Marie biscuit. Marie was a "noemnaam", a derivation

from Maria, Mary, the common first name awarded apparently indiscriminately so that a large proportion of Afrikaner women, and this included my mother, "Marietjie" (or *Maria Anna*, as it read in her ID book), ended up with it, this biblical yoke, or perhaps a homage to the plump earth mother of the Volk.

She was old, skeletal, partially if not entirely blind, but staggered down the street on her walks, muttering to herself – or rather, we fancied, to her mongrel Maltese, Sokkies,[17] who growled if we ever crossed their path.

She owned the plot adjacent to ours on the other side of the street and the one behind so that her property spanned an entire block. The plot on our side was all overgrown garden and tangled chicken wire fence, but if you peered through, you could see a thin path snaking to a little house in the rear. Looking back, the scene is almost out of Hansel and Gretel: the forest, the "witch", the house at the end of the path, uninviting, but the pomegranate tree; strange edenic fruit sagging, bursting, begging to be plucked.

Having limited exposure to forests or bush, this rundown garden, its wild twisting trees though dry and bleak, to us looked like a jungle paradise. But it was a paradise that was inaccessible because although we did a lot of crazy things, not one of us – not even Jaco Basson – would venture into her yard.

The tree stood at the edge of the yard, and reaching through a gap in the fence was as far as we would go. And even this was an anxiety-provoking task, and we'd run up our driveway until, out of breath, we reached our *stoep* (its cool marble pole), where we would pick through the fruit: bulbous and rough on the outside, with bruises like scabs, but bursting, we discovered, with a thousand plump rubies inside, gleaming, couched in bulging membrane cavities, reminding me of the purple teeth inside mineral ores.

We picked apart the sections like we might a beehive or the spider cocoons we sometimes found in the garden, to uncover the nature of the fruit, to locate its centre, its pip that would make sense of its organic formation. Suspicious of worms or pests, we applied the same skin-crawling caution: with sticks, digging around for the mother, the queen. (But only a million tiny spiders

[17] Socks.

would scatter out like a salt shaker, and we'd jump up, throwing the thing a distance away!) Pest-free, we would sample the fruit, and it would taste so right – the plenitude, the popping texture – that we would dig into new sections with abandon and glee, juice running down our cheeks, pips sucked dry and spat out on the driveway.

After a while our appetite inevitably waned, and the mineral aftertaste would come through, a fuzzy itchiness inside our cheeks, and we'd throw the remaining fruit on the tar to watch it smash into a bloody mess (individual globules packed snugly like charges). We didn't care that our mother yelled at us for staining our clothes or the *stoep*, but Johanna always showed up, lingering, imposing: "*Gee ´n stukkie daar…"*[18]

We never went back for seconds; the adrenaline of one rushed trip was enough, and besides, there were only a few reachable fruit around the periphery. Not even Jaco – who we came to discover every day since our first meeting was perfectly fearless – would go in there. Ordinarily he'd do anything: climb the steep pyramid of the church, ride his skateboard off the front steps, slide into an undiscovered crevice with no thought as to how he'd get out or climb down. He threw sand in the eyes of bigger kids when they fought and risked the biggest most beautiful marble goons, "moonrocks", and always lost, but it didn't seem to bother him.

We all did or tried to do these things but only after he showed it could be done. And of course, we loved to put him up to things. But he would not cross into her yard no matter how much we dared and teased and begged. He'd shake his head modestly, unembarrassed, working something in his jaw while fixing his eyes with mock consideration at a far-off point – before getting up to exercise his bizarre brand of autonomy. In addition to all this, he was adorable, with round cheeks and wild, green eyes, a little cherub-gremlin. Johanna called him her "seun"; she admired these values.

Most importantly, he climbed the highest in the Tree – to the topmost waving branches that barely qualified as more than twigs. He fell once, his feet catching on a lower branch and suspending him like a monkey above the parking lot tar. Upside down he was suddenly small, his head the head of an ordinary boy, the skin behind his ears reddening, his cries too were the unselfconscious wails of a child for his mother. We told the story of Tannie Deidre for weeks –

[18] Give me a piece…

who came running like a giraffe when Constant ran to call her – her neck and head sticking out eagerly and preceding her lower running half – everyone's roles recalled elaborately in the rescue attempt even though we were scared into an absurd passivity while it happened. Surely he couldn't fall, all bulging ears and cheeks like a pomegranate, to the tar?

His mother caught him just in time – as he was falling. Most of our childhood horrors seemed to be stopped just in time. But not Johanna, and not what happened to Tannie Marie.

For some reason, her garden hedge was a boundary uncrossable, though I doubt the witch folklore scared us away. An old lady, she was of no interest beyond baked goods and certainly not threatening beyond the authority which these ladies (with names like "Agnes" or "Peggy") assumed during weekly *Kinderkrans*[19] practice. But unlike these puffed-up tannies, she would stagger her skeleton past us with no bright decorum, no plastered smiles, muttering angrily and uninhibitedly in a distinctly non-churchgoing kind of way. It was like a filthy running radio commentary that you couldn't quite make out, sometimes as if directed at us, but mostly she kept her jeering comments to Sokkies, and we made sure to give their creeping trajectory a wide berth. We were not afraid of her exactly – I remember staring after her and once Jaco ventured a speck of gravel behind her – but in some inexplicable way, we were wary of her, the way people are wary of hermits, of those subsisting off the grid.

In the end, I think it could be put down to the fence. Physically, it was no match for our hard feet and canny limbs, but where a line was drawn and where there could be no argument, no claim to ignorance (the "beware the dog" sign that may as well have been a warning for toxic waste), we preferred to stay out of that unwelcome territory. We rarely entered the property of neighbours, not even of people we knew (unless we had just cause, an errant cricket ball for instance). Children have an almost preternatural appreciation of the laws of personal property; it's just about the only rule they understand – "finders keepers", "dibbs", "first-come, first-served", child's renditions of the more colonial rules of mine and yours, though no less prevalent in the grown up world.

One morning, I was greeted by the news that she was dead, killed by a burglar in the night while we slept. Knowing what I know now, it's unimaginable that my parents divulged the story.

[19] Church-affiliated afterschool playgroups.

My mother, eager to tell bad news, would hardly have gone into detail, only the inevitable, "What's happening to the country?" And my father, with his intolerance for melodrama, instructing her to make some tea. I don't know how I managed to come by the story, but it must have been Johanna. Only she would have the audacity to tell children such horror, the perversion even to make it up from scratch. Until now, I had never questioned the facts, how I came to know them, nor the things they surely obscured. But in hindsight, it is perhaps particularly grisly…

The shattering of the parlour window. The heightened clatter of useless things. A feeble struggle and the dying exhalations of dignity. Only later, the tongue-less shrieks from the balcony that alert the neighbours: rape, the cock crowed thrice. The neighbourhood asleep to the ruthless silver of an early summer dawn, she staggered to the stoep where she was finally found, already half-dead, a headless chicken flapping around.

He raped her, the bag of bones, and when she complained too much, cut out her tongue. I'm unsure what she finally died of, blood loss, internal injuries, but I think it was the shame. She had always been a private person.

Too young to grasp the mechanics of sex, that word (*vroeg ryp; vroeg vrot*)[20] held revolting, fleshy meanings that I know even if I don't know. To do with the skin below, with some unspeakably irritating meaning that made my cheeks hot when my mother broached the subject, or Johanna, suspicious when I stepped out of the bath: "Jy gewas tussen die slote en krake?"[21]

Whether entirely made up or, incredibly, true (her voice sounded so honest when she told it) or some concoction of half-truth and perversion, the story – I believed every word of it at the time – plagued me and continued to plague me. It wasn't the old woman, the fact of her death. She was scarcely human enough (a *skeleton*) to pity. My terror lay in the particularities (lying awake to imagine the procedure of her tongue being cut out). And then there was the implication, the horror (and I can just as surely see this intent, a glint in Johanna's eye when she told it) that this violation, this abomination may as well have happened to *us* – it was getting so close. The

[20] Early to ripen, early to spoil – Afrikaans saying related to promiscuity in the young.
[21] Have you washed between the ditches and cracks?

proximity had become the problem. Our parents reassured us: the old woman lived alone, isolated on that farm-sized yard. The police, I was told, suspected the gardener.

Even after she was dead and the property vacant for many years – a "ghost plot" – we never did cross that line. Something else, not someone specific, not even a person but rather a shady encroachment, had done that for us, and the place would always belong to something other now. The boundary had been crossed, the land violated. I didn't know how the real estate agent would ever manage to sell it.

In view of subsequent events, I think Johanna must have been inspired, if not spurred on telepathically, by the perpetrator in our street. She seemed practically buoyed by the news in the days that followed, walking around with an extra spring in her step like she knew something we didn't. She would drop these obscure little references to "die nag van die lang messe",[22] though, at that stage, we weren't sure what that was (Jaco claimed it was a kind of second coming). Always in passing, bent over to fetch some newspaper or spirits from the kitchen cupboard, the words whispered into the dark: "*lang messe*". And to be sure, the idea, the concept of these characters had become all the more hateful. Every homeless person, every bergie, was a "skollie", a thief who smuggled a hidden blade. It was wise to cross to the other side if you saw one sauntering down the road. These were the years leading up to change, not acknowledged or observed in our world but felt in our own special ways.

[22] The night of the long knives – a belief that all black people in South Africa would rise up and kill all whites.

Part 4

The School

Chapter 8: Rodney and Jeremy

Coming home from school rarely meant changing out of our uniforms like the children in Enid Blyton stories, mother or an eternally forbearing housekeeper waiting on us with tea. Barely inside the door, we'd fling our suitcases in the foyer and run outside. My mother would shout for us to take off our uniforms, but we pretended not to hear, racing to the glass door – the middle door as we called it – rattling the key in the lock until the glass threatened to burst. We'd leap full speed from the *stoep*, vaulting ourselves onto the vibacrete wall (which had replaced the iron fence), balancing there briefly before pulling ourselves into the tree. In the days before things changed, they stayed the same. We'd swing from our tree like we did every day, though you might catch us singing a familiar tune, replacing lyrics of Nelson Mandela (Mandela to us) dying a ditch death under the wheels of a truck:

My oom se motor is ´n ou masjien

hy maak hom vol met diesolien

en hy stamp en hy stoot en Mandela is doooood—[23]

There was a reigning, impotent calm, only mildly disrupted by the evening news, which my father commented on with abstract worry. The danger was curbed, the possibilities limited, and it seemed alright, charitable even, the odd few coloured kids filtering into the neighbourhood, introduced into white schools one at a time.

You saw more beggars in the neighbourhood. They asked for money, but our parents and Johanna were firm, offering hastily spread sandwiches. Sometimes they rang the bell when we were home alone, and seeing their blurry silhouette slumped against the wall (recognisable as if it

[23] Offensive parody of an Afrikaans folk song – The lyrics go: 'My uncle's car is an old machine/he fills it up with diesel/and it huffs and puffs and he drives over and kills Mandela."

were the same man every time), we pulled a barstool to the peephole to scrutinize them in the distorted frame. We held our breath against the door, sincerely threatened by the unwelcome visitor (the distinction between beggar and thief, in fact, murderer, had become very murky indeed). I'd strain my eyes, but through the viewer, they looked invariably like the "Crooked Man", an illustration in my worn-out copy of nursery rhymes. Sometimes the beggar peered back through the aperture, and I almost jerked off the stool. We'd all inch back, and if we were wise we'd close the curtains around the house, in case he walked around to one of the other entrances and saw us frozen behind the enormous panes of glass.

Almost overnight, we noticed a handful of coloured kids appear along the fringes of neighbourhood yards. It had become acceptable, I expect, for children to stay with their mothers if it didn't pain their employers too much. They slept in their mother's rooms at night but were free to rove the streets by day. Oddly, I still recall their names: Rodney, Jeremy and Timothy.

Rodney and Jeremy were considered a rare treat by us. They were so much more streetwise than we could ever be. They were like little adults, and we admired what we perceived as their limitless, parentless freedom. We sought them out. We desperately wanted to be their friends, these smiling ghosts that showed up around the church grounds some afternoons and not others.

I remember making mud pies with Jeremy, his face smiling shyly and a bit effeminately at me, his face much darker than Rodney's though they were brothers. We tried all the different soils in the garden and dug deep to arrive at the perfect consistency, him deferring to me, the authority on mud pies, chattering on and on about the recipe.

The fun ended sourly when my mother happened upon us, our hands sunk deep in a pool full of sludge – the "mixing bowl" – fingers interlaced in the hole that had started out as two separate holes. In our excitement, we'd left dug-up holes in beddings and muddied grass and splatters on walls. The neat rows of pies baking on the driveway did not impress her.

In the only picture of Rodney and Jeremy that I have, I am surprised by our positioning. I remember thinking they were elusive and sometimes a little difficult to coax into playing with us,

but to me, this reluctance was theirs, and it gave them a certain evasive allure. In the picture, they are barely visible: us at the far end of the front yard in our Sunday best, red tartan and stockings; them, on the other side of the short brick wall in the shadow of a tree, visible only as a pair of colourless stretched-out t-shirts. We lean over the wall and stand talking to them like this, but it is clear that something obstructs them from entering, or us from climbing over to the other side. Never would I have said that my parents forbade us from playing with coloured children. It was much more subtle, a type of mutual understanding abided by either side of the diminutive wall. They felt they ought not to, we felt they ought not to, and for the most part, we only played shyly, along its periphery in curious moments – unaware that from a distance, at least one of my parents was watching.

I remember them disappearing. One day, they did not come back as they had for a series of unofficial play dates. And just like that, and without any explanation, they were gone. I never saw them again but imagined them walking the streets, not having to go to school, playing arcade games with sand dusting their tar-trodden feet. I remember feeling rejected.

And then there was Timmy. Timmy was Dora from across the road's child, an especially filthy little boy with a snot-streaked face, and although he was small and cute, I always harboured a little revulsion for him. Timmy was the same age as my youngest brother, Bernard, and they played together while we were at school. My mother thought it was perfectly safe to let them roam the backyard, and having taken a liking to Dora, she had a little more tolerance for Timmy.

They played together while we were at school and even when we were home – they seemed to prefer each other's company. We were only too glad that they kept each other busy instead of slowing us down and never wondered what they got up to back there.

One day, we came home, breaking with our play routine only to seek out Johanna – it was one of her days – for the required greeting. We found her in the kitchen in one of her more jovial moods, tight-lipped but barely contained, deliberately cryptic but with that glint in her eye:

"*Kom*[24]," she uttered mysteriously and took off in the direction of the backyard. When we didn't follow immediately, she stopped in her tracks and stood gesturing impatiently.

When we came upon them in the backyard, I did not at first comprehend what I saw. Bernard had two of the ducks we kept dangling by the neck (they looked almost swanlike in their martyrdom) and was swinging them around, while Timmy, his toddler footfalls erratic on the cement, was chasing the others into a corner, striking them with a tree branch. Absurdly, this reminded me of the benign little silhouette printed on Cerebos salt shakers, and for the longest time I was under the impression that the little salt boy's parted hand was a twig he was using to chase the chicken (as if it was confirmed, this was just what people did with pheasants). There was no menace in their faces; it was as if they had worked themselves, mouths agape, into a gleeful frenzy. They had beaten the ducks, their soft white breasts, until they were bloody. One rescued from Bernard's grasp and wrapped in a blanket died a short while later, its glassy eyes like a doll's staring into oblivion. It disturbed me greatly to think that physically it was the same eye, the same eye as a moment before, when you could see the life in it and it could see back, and in the next instant a glass bead flashing absently, reflecting nothing.

It was nothing like the only other dead thing I'd seen: long-dead chameleons like prehistoric fossils littering the parking lot tar. Discovered long after the instant of slippage, their gaping buttonholes stared up at the treacherous branches overhead – I can just see their little bodies all fall from the sky.

It was baffling to witness such cruelty – and from someone I knew so well. It did not compute. I stood frozen while Johanna and my mother did most of the work: ushering the boys away, wrapping the most injured duck (the others were scratched up but otherwise okay), trying to get it to drink some water, but it only straightened its neck reflexively and made a chortling sound. At some point, I tried stroking it gently and talking to it in a soft voice, and then it was all over.

That night, we held the backyard funeral. We sang a song and said a little prayer, but it was all a little too pretend and a little too real, and I didn't know how to be sincere, so I busied myself with flowers and twig crosses. Bernard wasn't there, but I imagine I see him watching

[24] Come

from my mother's room, perhaps lucid now, although, in reality, he may have been too young to understand.

We all dismissed the incident and never spoke of it again; it was so out of character for Bernard, who had always been the "good" one. I don't remember there being any punishments or even enquiries into what they'd done. My parents seemed almost too embarrassed to ask, as if he'd been caught instead touching himself. It was put down to the influence of Timmy, but I suspect it had something to do with their prolonged isolation in the backyard – the improbable freedom of being shut in a concrete yard. With the flattening of time, it seems we all went a little mad, unchecked and boxed in at the same time.

Johanna was the only one who punished Bernard, for they were *her* ducks. She claimed all things she saw as residual, uncared for or unwanted by us, snatching it up, usurping it by name: her cup, her yard, her dog. She chastised him for weeks with acid words hissed in moments alone: "moffie", *faggot*. At that stage, I thought this was as far as it would go.

Looking back, this incident could be construed as the beginning, the trigger that set in motion a series of retributive events, but I am hesitant. She hated him long before ducks roamed the snail-infested dystopia of the backyard, and I am convinced that something or other would have tipped her over – things standing the way they had in our family for so long. Perhaps the small tragedy could be seen instead as a sacrifice (wilted garlands giving the grave the appearance of an altar). The slaughter of a small white duck – it was poetic was it not? But it would not be enough. That was the point: not nearly enough.

Perhaps it should be mentioned that "Nkosi-Sikelela",[25] the technicolor duck we found in the garden bushes, had flown away. Named by Johanna in honour of our new rainbow nation, it had appeared bizarrely and improbably like it had fallen out of some tropical paradise, but suddenly as it appeared, having lived contently (albeit mutely) with the other monochrome ducks in the yard, it disappeared, flying away on unclipped wings and so escaping the onslaught.

[25] God bless Africa. Originally a Xhosa hymn, it forms a portion of the national anthem.

Chapter 9: Fairy Tales and Fables

It was around that time that my parents decided it was time for a change of our own. And as was their habit, their decision had its basis in what was called the children's best interest. Though I find it incredible that this change coincided with that year, that inauguration of colour, which, beyond a change of date in the fine blue margins of my schoolbooks, went by practically unobserved.

The same green blackboard. The same etched desks and checkered linoleum floors, dusty, faded, the pallid green universal to institutions. The same charts, conversion tables, ABC's. But for all the anchoring denominators, the new class was bizarre. The walls were bookcases, the counters laboratory slick; still, the effect was of a cavern or den, windows painted, surfaces predominantly wood or glass, with anomalies like foetal things in jars. The desks, wobbly and mismatched, were grouped instead of forward-facing. At the back of the room, a glass display case was fixed to the wall. Inside, an owl sat half-perched on a driftwood branch, wings spread in take-off, beak frozen in a silent squawk. Its wild owl eyes stared, the cataract glaze of the dead swapped out with yellowing beads.

There was the language to contend with, and before the transfer could take place, there was a fair amount of bureaucracy to be bridged. My parents threatened and behaved indignantly: It was our right, and they could hold us back no longer. There was an inexplicable reference to Mandela, and if all else failed, there was always the other school. If anyone asked, I recited, "It's more international," in what resembled an American accent. Finally, it was decided I would see the principal, Mr. Brown, for a test of my "readiness".

I was to tell a story. An English fairy tale. Standing in the principal's office, I decided on the story of *Rooikappie*, Little Red Riding Hood. I knew the story well, but to my astonishment, he had to prompt me when the English name wasn't there. Pictures of sleek red hoods flooded me, English

pictures, but the word *kappie*[26] got stuck in my brain as if on my head. *Kappies*: what *tannies* wore in the Great Trek, on the farm, in the slaughterhouse – made of stiff apron material, buttercup, shell-like with curtain frills – not at all the right word (although it's there: *Rooi Kappie Rooi Kappie Rooi Kappie*). In all likelihood, I'd never heard the English word, but the separate velveteen concept was there too, billowing, breezing, just out of reach.

And so I staggered along with only the most rudimentary words, "wood", "wolf", "grandma" instead of *ouma*. But the Afrikaans fables of *Jakkals en Wolf*[27] confused the plot, and suddenly I was unsure if the woodcutter saved Red Riding Hood before or after she was consumed whole by the wolf. It didn't make sense that she should be saved once she was eaten. It was too late, a gruesome improbable reversal. Standing there, fixed in Mr. Brown's spectacles, it became painfully clear that what I thought I knew of English came without storylines, without even words – like the green and red pictures in nursery rhymes or of train stations in my father's books. They were jumbled, alluring metaphors, one shifting seamlessly into the next, and when I tried to separate them into words, into stories, I started to feel as if I was making the story up as I went along.

Suddenly the smooth green world I was only beginning to inhabit seemed so perverse. The suspense, the incremental seduction: "Grandma, how big your eyes are… All the better to see you with my child, how large your nose, your mouth… Come closer my child …" I couldn't possibly inhabit the role of the speaker, the wolf in sheep's clothes – in another world – with the irrepressible desire to consume.

The greedy, the presumptuous, these children became the victims of cautionary tales: Hansel and Gretel, Goldilocks. Even Snow White couldn't resist the hag's red apple. And the reversal so improbable: the kiss of true love, the great escape, the cut-open-and-sewed-back-up stomach. Rebirth after certain death. No, in this world, the witch, the wolf they would surely win. They moved between worlds, and they knew how to plan.

The most fascinating fable came as a man in a top hat and leather shoes. The source is obscure,

[26] Afrikaans for "hood".
[27] Jackal and Wolf, famous Afrikaans children's stories.

maybe my old book of nursery rhymes with the falling apart seams, but I'm sure it's also in *Alice in Wonderland* as a dream or a story within a story. (Later in life, I encountered it as a song: "I am the Walrus".)

One day, a man was soaked when the tide came in, splashing across the cobblestone pavement he was crossing. He had a on a top hat and a pocket watch strung to his coat, or rather, it was a "monocle" (*all the better to see you with my child*). He was a gentleman, although somewhat dishevelled, pausing to pour seawater from his shoe. Curiously, instead of skipping over the puddle, he walked into it, deeper and deeper, up to his waist until he was submerged, and entered the underwater world.

On the ocean bed, the man found a clustering of the cutest little baby oysters. He bent to take a look through his eyeglass: cherubs with shells like *kappies*, they regarded him with smiling, upturned faces. Their mother was asleep, her eye a closed eyelash slit. Suddenly the man was sinister. He looked as crooked as the Crooked Man, rubbing his hands together. He did not have to wrench the oysters from their footing on the ocean floor; all the cajoling they needed was a cheerful ditty, and astonishingly, they bounced up to form a procession. The baby oysters were tiny and cute as they followed the man out of the water world, plentiful as they trotted along the cobblestone path to the man's home.

At this point, I was unsure what he wanted them for. There was their tininess (which to a child borders on the erotic), and of course, there was the almost mythic notion of a glossy pearl. I imagined this to be the most desirous reason for tricking the oysters out of safety.

Inside his house, when the man's motives were made clear – that he was to eat the little things – this seemed okay too. I wanted the man to win even though I had liked the oysters. Their cuteness began to border on stupidity. I blamed the mother oyster for not being more vigilant. The man, I felt, almost deserved his meal for venturing underwater and persuading the little things to be eaten. Only once they were gone, consumed whole and occupying his belly, did I feel a respite. The cute things were no more; the pleasure was over. There would be no woodcutter, no salvation. Was it worth obliterating something so desirous to remove it from sight?

Equally, the one about the half-forgotten fable of the seal woman, near mermaid, all the

more exotic for her fur pelt:

A fisherman happened upon a group of seals swimming in an ocean pool. To his amazement they peeled off their fur, and he realised they were women, beautiful women. He watched from a vantage point, a voyeur to their naked bathing ritual. Emboldened, he ventured out of hiding to where the women had left their pelts on the shore. He grabbed one and hid it. When the women came ashore, one was left naked, unable to return from whence she came. The man took her home and married her. They had a child. He'd kept her pelt hidden all those years. One day, she stumbled upon the hide, carelessly exposed now that he'd become complacent in their life. What she did next surprised me. I expected distance, alienation from the salt-encrusted thing. At most, a nostalgic stroke of the fur before she packed it away. Instead, she made for the shore as if obeying a siren call – as if she'd been merely thwarted, off course – a migratory bird finding its way back north. She disappeared into the waves like Virginia Woolf, abandoning her blood for the sea that still ran in her veins.

And ever since these fables —the effect a single story can have on a child! – I experienced a strong sensation, at once fascination and revulsion, at the boundary between water and land. At the possibility of slipping from one element to the other. I persisted in playing at this boundary – now on this side, now on that. I found myself wanting to manipulate its invisible threshold. There were the vessels to take domestic comfort out to sea, the containers in which to seize and recreate the ocean world at home. Neither proved feasible: the rafts unsupported with buoys of air sank to the ocean bed, and the basins of seawater, murky and smelly after a few days, stood abandoned in the yard. But the idea of hybrids, of mermaids or fish out of water, these archetypes would persist and their symbols still pervade my dreams.

Only one small thing ever came close: a trivial memory from an east coast holiday that made my head sing with inexplicable pleasure long after, that created an imperative, an obsession, to recreate the effect for the entire duration of the trip.

Early one morning, I was playing in a rock pool situated near an otherwise ordinary landscape. In fact, the boundary of what was sea and what was land blurred at the slight lapping

of water over grass. I was playing with starfish, collecting those with interesting kaleidoscope patterns while on the lookout for *klipvissies*[28].

I spotted one nearby, and in a stroke of intuition, chased it to the edge of the water with one hand and curbed it with the other, blocking it off, shallower and shallower, until I had manipulated it to the shallowest lick of water over earth. At this stage, it was only about half-submerged, its top half sticking out in the air, but it was still surprisingly nimble, darting between sticks and pebbles. It seemed perfectly satisfied to be there, making no attempt to get back to deeper water (where the pursuing God-hand lurked), and so, for a while, I could control its movements by cordoning off its space to roam. I could almost touch it, but this seemed unfair, going too far. I was satisfied to see it there, a fish out of water (like the oysters prancing gaily on cobblestone), and I imagined it living almost happily in this world. This little trick, this trap between my own hands, lasted no more than a few seconds, but for a moment, the fish – its freckled flesh like the striations of river pebbles – was so close I was in the sea world, in this little sanctuary of in-between. And for the rest of the day, that little section of not pool not earth remained a magical world where I could happily imagine a fish living between grass, between sticks and stones.

Despite failing the test, my parents persisted. They leveraged an offer from the other school, and eventually Mr. Brown conceded. I remember feeling some pride at my parents' triumph, a kind of smugness at their clever foresight as I left the large class of Afrikaans kids behind. My mother warned us, "Remember your mother tongue." As if this could be done with conscious effort, and as if it was confirmed, we would convert only for practical, for public purposes. At home, in what would steadily become a secret life, we would remain Afrikaans, unchanged.

Afrikaans had indeed been my mother tongue, with all its maternal connotations, built in terms of endearment and diminutives – and with my mother having always been the more authentic Afrikaner. The farm stories and sing-songs, her Piketberg idioms and made-up words (*pikaters*), which we never received without scorn or laughter ("Maak julle *pikaters* met julle

[28] Tiny rockpool fish.

ma?"[29]). But my mother's language never did anything to convince me of her love, and perhaps her tjie-tjie-tjie's[30] only put more distance between us.

She was a mother as if it were a preordained role, as if she were a picture of maternal brightness straight out of *Sarie*,[31] or otherwise just the silhouette, the trim figure from a needlework catalogue, ooh-ing and aah-ing, fussing absently, making little busy sounds while she brushed back my ponytail or took in my hem, talking through the needle clasped between her teeth. Even when we were close like this, there was the airy feeling, the easy nonsensical laughter, the fluff (the goose down quilt from her own girlhood that she tucked me under), as if she were cooing instead to a doll.

Round, closely spoken syllables vibrated pleasantly in my inner ear, but they never penetrated at all, and I'd find myself fighting resentment that I'd allowed myself to pass into her hands again – as she snagged my hair, dropped another pin. Easily irritated – I could never figure out what was going on inside her head – I came to the conclusion that her affectionate but inane language held some deliberate embarrassing intention. Her words seemed always to betray something of my body, in an innocent sort of way: overfamiliar terms of endearment for sex parts, flighty violations of privacy, insincere touches made worse by their invariable accompaniment with baby words, every private conversation, every embarrassment reiterated in high tones in front of the boys. Everything in the service of some ridiculous kind of amusement. Her language operated as if to demystify something far more mysterious than it could keep account of; it kept a generic distance.

As if my mother sensed my unbelief, my non-cooperation in the mother-daughter charade, her attempts withered, grew more pathetic until she tried less and less. With the abandonment of the *moedertaal*,[32] the last of my mother would now also become erased.

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[29] Are you making *pikaters* with your mother?
[30] Referring to the overuse of the diminutive form in the Afrikaans language, where almost any proper noun can be converted to the diminutive through adding the "tjie" suffix.
[31] A popular Afrikaans woman's magazine.
[32] Mother tongue.

Chapter 10: Miss Brown

On the first day in the new class, we were handed a sheet of paper with the words: "Comprehension Test" written in big letter across the top. Oblivious to the universe's sense of irony, I had no idea what this meant. I looked around, making quizzical faces at the other kids, hoping to find, if not someone to tell me what to do, an expression that mirrored my own. But seeing only the dullness of habit in the other kids' faces, I settled on asking the girl seated across from me to borrow a pencil.

"Can I lend a pencil?" I mouthed, gesturing a writing motion with my hand.

"I don't know. Can you?" she quipped back unexpectedly. I must have looked genuinely baffled, because she gave in, digging dutifully over the items in her double-decker case before pulling out a spare stub.

"You *may*," she corrected, bestowing the blunt object. "And it's borrowed" she added, reciting: "Lend is for lenders, borrow for borrowers, and beggars can't be choosers."

There was a picture, a smudged inkblot that I stared at while the other kids read the passage. It resembled woodland countryside, the kind of place where people might wear wellington boots, and there was what looked like a foxhole, or was it just a splotch? I had tried to read the text, stamped in a bold block, but my eyes had passed over the thick letters without a picture forming in my mind. There were allusions, the odd word I thought I recognised, and a hypothesis however cautious would begin to form (a twine of expectation followed into the dark…) only to find myself lost again. There was something wrong about the writing. It assumed a kind of familiarity even beyond the difficult words. It shut me out of the box of text as if it were too tightly packed for me to slip through. There was no beginning, no end; I was afloat, exposed – but still there was the pressure to do something.

Again, I looked around, sure there was some information I had missed. But I was outside a conspiracy of standards that everyone else flew through effortlessly and indifferently. And so, with nothing else to do, I stared into the inkblot, doing what I had done when I had read stories to

my mother as a baby: hatching them from the illustrations.

Miss Brown had been occupied behind the stacks of paper on her desk. She stood up to collect the sheets and walked, smiling, around me scribbling nonsense. She reached the desk of the girl across from me – head at an angle, jotting down last-minute answers – and snatched the paper without warning. “But miss, that’s unfair!” the yellow-haired girl moaned, obviously ignorant of Miss Brown’s outlook on all things unfair.

Miss Brown could easily have been mistaken for a kindly old matron (though I suspect she wasn’t yet fifty), stout but more boxy than plump and with the lines of a mousy brown bob doing little to detract from her stuffy figure. She had a whimsical enthusiasm for all things quaint: doilies, needlework, hardcover books, everything papered or covered in tiny flowered textile. Of course, there were oddities: the stuffed fowls, the labelled jars, the eccentric laboratory air of an otherwise grandmotherly disorder, but far more disturbing was her voice.

Sometimes her hopscotch to-and-fro tone would grow dark and drawn out, and though she barely raised her voice, it would become unnervingly perilous, smacking with accusatory irony, as if she were speaking to someone much older. In fact, she always conducted herself as if she were in the company of an adult with whom she was on some intimate footing, though this often failed to impress its full effect on the more dense English children.

And as I was to find out, she reserved the right to break her cordial familiarity with the class. At any time, she might undercut her eager banter, her mousey silences with a sudden villainous cry: *“Whoooooo said that!”* The unexpected turn in tenor making me jump in my seat, making me doubt whether it was meant entirely seriously. (Equally dubious, I soon came to imagine, was the sincerity of her friendly, chatty standing with the class.)

What disturbed me most was this: you could never be sure. On one occasion, she indeed began to chuckle as if everything was too preposterous all of a sudden. I imagine even the less-self-conscious English kids, who seemed to me almost naturally arrogant, were unsettled by the complexity of her tone.

Her favourite sentiment was that the world is an unfair place. A victim of the world’s

indifference herself, she may have thought she was preparing us, and she spat this out at every opportunity (taking habitual advantage of slow or haughty children or of new kids ignorant of her philosophies), as she did responding to the yellow-haired girl's comment: "NOTHING but NOTHING is unfair in myyyyy class!" For all its venom, there was a disturbing control of rise and fall.

I was shocked that the silence after this outburst was not final.

"But… but miss..." the girl started up, reddening but determined to explain.

"Silence—" Miss Brown ruled, somehow less enraged than a moment ago. Silence is golden, another of her favourite dictums.

While I spent most of my time worried, analysing, coming to terms with the complex workings of the class (and not a little terrified of earning the brunt of her scorn), I found it safer to err on the side of sincerity than be thought insolent in the many scenarios for misunderstanding. I stuck to the face value of declarations, however bizarre, eager to take things literally, to answer rhetorical questions. Unfortunately, this not uncommonly made me look like an idiot, and the other kids started to treat me as if I were a bit slow, and then as if I were very strange indeed.

Of course, my eagerness to please and natural Afrikaner modesty ingratiated me with Miss Brown – she preferred ma'am – and I became her favourite of sorts, though this was by no means a guaranteed position.

I continued to do well in my schoolwork; this was the only security. My parents sat with me in the evenings, in the end doing most of the work themselves. I remember my mother's handwriting in my book, though it had always been similar to my own (this at an age when one's hand was important, especially in girls, with my yellow-haired neighbour mastering a charming, slanted style). No matter how hard I tried to disguise it, my letters, in particular the e's – how hungry they looked – bore the same flat, round, almost deliberate idiosyncrasies of my mother's, and it irked me, this inescapable, awkward nature of mine.

The imposter feeling started then: having to lie in order to blend in but unable to do this well. And so, the option that remained was to stop speaking altogether, speaking only when

required and during orals, with my hands linked behind my back. Of course, it didn't take long to learn the language, being still quite young, but by the time the words came easily, it was too late. I had already clamped up.

To be fair, there was a girl, Meagan, though no one was sure of the pronunciation – *Meegan* or Megan – who was even quieter than me, never once raising her voice beyond a pressed whisper. She was large, with a smooth, honeyed complexion, and no one said it, but it was always there, the fact that she looked half-coloured and smelled of fish.

Inclined as I was later to believe that Miss Brown was mentally ill – borderline, bi-polar or perhaps more severely deranged – this would not explain her particular peculiarity. I imagine she got away with her behaviour only because she was the younger sister of the headmaster, as if she could be kept there, a madwoman hidden in the basement (the windows inexplicably blackened). Though it was true that teachers got away with a lot in the days when the efficacy of corporal punishment was still up for debate, some parents sending their children to school with notes requesting the teacher feel free to punish them in the old way.

And so I read. Ma'am Brown, also being the school librarian, made suggestions, paisley hardcovers without pictures: Lewis Carroll and Enid Blyton. The blocks of fat letters became stories, worlds. The world, I imagined, the other kids lived in. I remember those adventure stories as a distant imaginary club I desperately wanted to belong to and did (if only as an ever-present pair of eyes), a ghost party, a silent cousin taken along out of charity but nevertheless validating the journey: someone to go "see this" to. And even when I realised that these worlds were not one and the same, that they were in fact far removed from any world, they remained a comfort, an escape.

And so, before assimilating into any culture, I was entering the fictional world of the British 1940s as it was written for a child. The world of Dick and Fanny, of teatime and hilly countryside, of tame little country streams and colonial journeys in steamboats, of circuses and lighthouses. Of mysteries, of pickles, of scowls, and jolly good ol' times.

I sped ahead of the other kids in "Reading Laboratory" (the choice of title doing nothing

to demystify the laboratory factor of the room), an educational game comprising coloured folders of reading pieces that increased in difficulty as the rainbow of hues progressed (and perhaps travelling back in a very specific kind of time), the colours somehow different too, the mid-browns and greens of train stations or cartons of colouring crayons – thus entitling you to say, "I'm on Gold," which was rather a kind of mustard yellow-brown. I remember reading at some stage about the discovery of penicillin and being much caught up in the scholarly hoorahs.

There were needlework classes, and Miss Brown, as the school needlework teacher, fostered in me, like a Victorian governess encouraging busy hands, a fondness for embroidery (this being perhaps the only other occupation that didn't require speaking), and I would sit by the window doing the repetitive task, like the sensible sister of some old-fashioned heroine.

And like most every Boer woman before me, I too came to enjoy the steady whirr of the sewing machine, the speed with which individual stitches churned out, the mechanical tinkering with bobbins and thimbles, and guiding the thread along a predetermined little course. It was a rare illusion of control, a legitimate excuse to sit quietly inside a world of my own, as if inside some fast-moving vehicle that blurred only very slightly everything outside, something that not only allowed the stillness that was taking over inside but, in spite of it, produced a patchwork of flower designs, intricate patchworks of such complex uniformity that they, in turn, allowed me to entertain fanciful notions that there existed at least some source of enchantment and continuity (even if, at the time, I believed it was hidden inside some compartment of the sewing machine's brain).

There were piano lessons. I had no talent, but my parents persisted: it was a language that civilised people came to understand. Moments would culminate in front of that object after weeks of practice, moments in which my fingers would hover after the second or third mistake, and I would feel a sudden forceful alienation. I would wonder, not in a rebellious instinct, but rather a kind of objective disembodiment: why was I doing this? Why was anyone doing any of this? I was yet too young to know what I meant, that certainly "this" meant homework and piano lessons but that it might also include activities such as learning and speaking, might go as far as work, church, family.

The piano had not always been an object of such abject terror. Hadn't it once been a

hiding place, an enclave of security against the sitting room wall? The speckled carpet had formed an indentation from my regular seated position, as had the springy grating covering the back of the instrument, which, if you pressed your ear against it and waited (your brothers likewise awaiting instruction outside), would fill your head with a tempest of ominous and rising currents: a few notes that signalled all the unfinished melodrama of the world.

Years later, I was to be reminded of this in a Francis Bacon painting – angst of the vibrating kind, counterpointed by an inevitable inanimate object – the very dimensions of space. In the early years of life, these objects always seemed to be wooden, lacquered table legs, piano enclosures, nonetheless movable. But later, when these feelings became more defined, buildings, monuments, concrete things, I would crush them under my feet.

Slowly, without my consent, without my knowledge or the knowledge of my parents, I was becoming a ghost – a ghost that not only stalked the fringes, that stood on the outside of things (the other side of a panel of glass), but a ghost to myself. A stranger staring out from within, looking at the world as through the impenetrable looking glass, the stricken unfocused gaze of a caged bird (or one stuffed), bewildered, afraid, but with not a thought, not a single thought, as if staring out from nothing. I did not know it yet, but this would be the beginning of nearly a decade of silence.

During break, uncertain what to do with myself, having no friends nor the inclination to sit in the bathroom eating my lunch alone, I developed an odd pastime. I would walk the gutters around the school, an unbroken cement path around warehouses, storage, outhouses, and gravel lots where the other children played. There was a tree in the centre with roots that upturned and cracked the tar that I should have liked to climb, but suddenly that seemed impossible. I carved for myself the task of walking this pathway. Through corridors between outdoor classrooms (running my hands along the zinc ripples), past sudden dead-ends of piled-up construction materials and an unconquerable depot of locked-away fertilizer: a labyrinth of storage and disposal. Once, I got carried away, and having traced my way up a rooftop runoff pipe, I pursued its incline up the wall, resulting in a near spill on the ground below.

It wasn't long before I determined to stick to the periphery, following an unbroken circuit around vibacrete camps, maintenance sheds, up and down grey steps, now treading the grass edge of earlier grades, now the intermediate square allotted to us, now turning sharply to follow the rain gutter back to the beginning, the connecting doors, and through them, on the other side, an enclave where plastic bags blow in a rising spiral: around and around, soothing, enjoyable, eyes on the ground – it alone would dictate where I went – too fast for anyone to question me, somewhere to be… somewhere I was meant to be going.

Part 5

The Church Grounds

Chapter 11: Chicken

After school, suitcases were still flung in foyers, kitchen greetings rattled off, and middle doors threatened to burst, the rush to get outside only impeded by a new habit of taking off school shoes before launching our feet on the vibacrete's treacherous edge.

The neighbourhood children still gathered at the base of the Tree, and though a few teased us – one of the older boys came up with a singsong about "*draadsitters*"[33] – I withstood it, the image of a chicken on a fence, only to realise I didn't think there was anything wrong with fence sitting. The best of both worlds, not to mention the advantage of a bird's eye view. The only embarrassment was the soft feet I'd cultivated from wearing school shoes ("toughies", they were called), and as if to renew my toughness, I would run laps around the church grounds, scattering gravel through the rocky promenade where the worker's shack stood.

By the time they started calling us *souties*[34] or, worse, *rooinekke*,[35] things had changed, of course, and our feeble retort, *boer*, did not seem to have the same effect. And though the opposition was mostly in jest, such things had never been important before. (Had we ever really thought of ourselves as *boere* before?)

One afternoon, I was riding my bike through that tread-worn route, the gravel alley, the cement shack, past the pecan, the lemon trees. It was a windy day, and I was circling the grounds at a daring speed, not heeding the obstacle-ridden promenade (famous for puncturing even the thickest wheels), skidding over the clay surface, the makeshift speed bumps the workers had put up (this along with a few pathetic spikes and nails driven into our favourite spots on the roof) but which only prompted us to attempt wheelies or other more risky manoeuvres, following a more or less continuous path over steps, gutters, walkways, an unbroken circle around the axis of the

[33] Fence-sitters.
[34] Salty – a derogatory term used by the Afrikaner to refer to the English.
[35] Rednecks – not quite the same as the American use of "redneck", here it is used as a general insult to English people, referencing the way the English used to burn the backs of their necks under the South African sun.

church – they were becoming a habit, these periphery marathons – each bump, each obstacle so tangibly the same in its repetition that my concentration could be reduced to the ground before and alongside the line that my front wheel cut, nothing pondered beyond a blur that soon lay in my dusty wake. As if suddenly the world outside these grounds – the world "out there", defined in previous years by its off-limits status during games of hide and seek – could now be erased by the oblivion of speed and wind.

I emerged from the alley, and the crunch of gravel gave way to a section of fresh tar, and the effect was of escape – smooth black tar against the eroded grey of the rest which, for as long as it lasted, made your tires sing with an enjoyable new speed. Near the front of the church, I slowed down, aware of the possibility of observers: *Kinderkrans tannies*,[36] the *koster*, but, far more perilous, the possibility of kids from school, catching sight of me in my dungarees, riding a BMX on the sidewalk no less. The begging question had become: was I too old to be playing outside?

It was only Coenie and Jaco. They came out of their driveway, a group of boys pushing off mountain bikes that rose to their necks. They were older; some of them I knew from school, Coenie's friends. Jaco appeared, and with him, a boy about his age; someone's cousin, I later found out.

Loath to break my continuous path, I didn't acknowledge them. They were a rough crowd, the older boys. Sometimes they bullied my brothers, and Coenie was worse around them. They only played for goons and habitually introduced new rules to the game. One time, this in spite of all the unspoken stipulations, Constant won. It was a high-stakes game, moonrock goons with rainbow blotches like oil spills in the sun or inside the windows of stoves. Afterwards, the boy asked to see Constant's winnings, just for a moment. He held it up to the sun, as if inspecting a flaw, but before we knew it, he had hurled it against the tar which such force that it split with a devastating chipping sound into glassy shards.

They sped along the street in wild loops, playing their rough games, one of which was

[36] Female afterschool teachers

called “Chicken”, which consisted of either Coenie or his friend Hoffer lying on their backs in the middle of the road, just daring a car to run them over. Due to a lack of traffic, the game stretched into the afternoon, with all of us sitting along the gutter, waiting for Coenie and Hoffer’s impending crushing. The two younger boys got restless and continued to cycle up and down the road. With both boys at opposite ends of the street and hurtling towards the other, it became apparent they were aiming for each other. Along the curb, all the wilted heads perked up instinctively – until then only half-alive, sharpening sticks or killing whole brigades of ants – their heads turned in near-unison to follow the new sideshow down the street.

As they drew in, someone had to swerve out: the “chicken”. Jaco was crazy; we all knew, but did the new boy know? I saw Jaco poised in his saddle, slightly hunched, steeling himself for impact, while the cousin peddled madly, swaying dangerously to and fro.

When an unstoppable force met an immovable object, Jaco ducked forward and grabbed the kid’s handlebars. With a jerk, the bicycle came to a halt; the boy, however, did not, catapulting over Jaco’s shoulders, head first on the asphalt.

Oddly, I don’t have my own memories of the aftermath, but it was a head wound; there must have been blood, blood like the juice of a pomegranate spreading on the tar, but all that I remember is white, the white bone of his scalp open beneath the soft chick fuzz of his “punk” hairdo – the buzz cut was gaining popularity over the step.

White was the mark of a really bad wound, and the converse held too – if you couldn’t see white, it wasn’t so bad. I’d only seen it once before, the wound held open by Jaco after he’d scraped his foot to the bone. We got hurt a lot on the church grounds: grass-burned, gravel-scraped knees and hands, banged-up heads, and broken teeth. Bloody noses from rugby, black-and-blue shins, twisted ankles, these were all bad, and I’d seen some pretty gross things: egg-shaped lumps that grew and grew, legs at weird angles from jumping off roofs, purple toes and fingers jammed shut in doors, but seeing such a deep hole in someone’s head marked something else, a new kind of possibility, or the lack of possibility. Anything could and had happened here on this, our church grounds.

Afterwards, we blamed the boy. He was a boy easy to dislike. Last I recall, his mother

came in a station wagon, spiriting him into the backseat. She appeared almost unconcerned, operating with quiet, nurse-like efficiency – which alerted me, because this is what people did when things were really bad. I found it strange how she didn't blame Tannie Deidre or any of us, as if she already knew all and was very tired. We never saw him again, but the rumour was he got brain damage and had to go live on a farm.

The farm, which by then had become a place where things got sent to or from: animals, vegetables, melons, and pampoen, even the Sunday leg of lamb, all gotten from the farm. Netta had been from farm country, and so had Sophie before her. It was in them, the tragic quality, like in the creaky slate door keeping out the filth and mosquitos even as they accumulated in its grain, in the rotting pot plants adorning the *stoep*, the pumpkins ripening on zinc roofs or holding them down. There were packs of feral unfed cats – litter upon litter – until most had to be shot shortly after birth. And without seeing them again or having to set a foot out there, you knew they were still there, these people and their offspring, occupying the no-man's land between supply and demand (those unliveable hovels…), rotting in the open, left behind, completely overlooked by time.

Chapter 12: Relics

Not long after the upheaval about the boy, I finally saw my own backside. It was the summer holidays, Caesar was dead, and a new terror had come to reign the grounds; the church grounds transformed into a battle zone where you had to find islands of elevation in order to elude the new dog.

The new dog, a rabid *boerboel*[37] that chased us from afternoon till evening, had replaced (as a more suitable guard dog) the imaginary-fish-gobbling husky who had died earlier that year. Thinking we could outrun him, we dodged circles around Coenie and Jaco's whitewashed wall, now on this side of the free-standing gabled old thing, now on that, trying to fool it before inevitably scampering on top – that was when we found out the dog had no difficulty jumping up and biting our butts.

We emerged from our docked ship one day – beamed down in elevators, laser zappers at the ready – embarking on an exploration of the unfamiliar terrain. It was hot, the barren new land, its primordial crust scorched and cracked by the heat of an alien sun, so that we had to tread carefully with our bare feet as if making our way in the dark. But it wasn't long before we were traversing unstable crags, leaping volcanic fissures – leveraging branches like Olympic pole-vaulters (quickly tiring even of make-believe vigilance).

There were tiny moving ribbons of red ants below, which, if you squinted your eyes, were really streams of molten lava, flowing past the decaying corpses of prehistoric giants with curled-up tails or sweeping away the tragically flat endings of birds of prey. Would they be consumed by the ceaseless trickle, I wondered, until nothing remained?

All this to contend with, when we realised the dog was out. Too far away from the safety of the ship, I took off in the direction of the wall. As I was running, I knew it was hopeless, but in my panic, there was nowhere else, and I seized on the crescent of its repeated bridge. Almost immediately, the dog was at my back, and my balance, uncertain on the convex surface, wavering to this, to that side, and with a jerk from behind, I fell.

I landed on the tar on my hands and knees, and by now all-too-familiar, the searing pain of that common injury. There'd been the time I erupted from the worker's alley only to lose my balance in the transition (the easier thing in the end to do on an object held up by the strength of its own momentum) and found it again at a precarious new angle: the offshoot of my daily ellipsis, I spun out farther still, gyre shortening even as I tried to regain control, the incline too much (my body near parallel to the ground) – it never occurred to leap off! – my centre could not hold.

[37] A South African mastiff.

I was on the dog's level now, albeit on the other side of the wall, but it wasn't long before it discovered me. All that was left, to curl into a ball.

They did the humane thing. There was something "not right" with the dog. The children were told it got sent to an aunt or uncle's farm but Johanna made sure we knew the truth of its final destination. And not for a second did I entertain illusions about its viciousness, it had never been a defect of nature or disease, but a function – a *dysfunction* – of the family itself. Coenie and Jaco, as they did to everything, "broke" it. It was common knowledge that Jaco couldn't keep a cat – each ran away after the other, and once I saw him swing one by the tail and found out why. Those years were hard on animals.

As for my own injuries, there were the mercurochrome treated scrapes on my hands and knees, which my father said made them look worse than they really were; the wounds on my back that I wasn't privy to myself, and the rabies shot (just in case), but what really affected things were the gashes on my face: one across on the forehead, the temple and most prominently, above the lip. The cut had gone just about right through, probably inflicted by the paw rather than the mouth, so that it could have been much worse. It got stitched into a seam that healed into a shallow depression from the angel's bow to the nostril – perhaps not unlike children born with a split palate. My parents made every effort, but all the doctor's visits yielded hardly more than a phrase to placate the irreversible: "It would get better with age." It was Coenie who delivered the final pronouncement, to his friends but within earshot: "If she'd been pretty before, she isn't anymore."

Johanna complained the dog had seemed fine to her (and at the audacity of an animal being put down on *my* behalf). She pulled me out of my vagueness – if only to incriminate or embarrass me in front of my English friends. She was the only one, it seemed, who had stayed the same. She had something to say on everything, the most remote matters, my knobby legs ("*spyker* bene"),[38] for instance, in ripped jeans that had nothing on Tina Turner. But against her better efforts, she had been relegated to the background. She must have felt it then, that she was fading away, that she too had become a relic.

[38] legs like nails

There were our chats in the washroom. They became longer and more frequent but also more and more covert, as if she wanted to invoke my loyalty now more than ever. She was also unforgiving, shattering my illusions, making fun of my English airs (she too could speak English, but it was mostly gibberish in the Queen's accent). Gossip became her economy, her singular leverage and way in. She used it for and against us all. There was, I'm sure, the awareness that I had gotten older – and, in truth, it had gotten easier to appease, to humour her – and while she talked, I might drift on to other things. She needed assurance, a titbit on my parents, my brothers, to solidify our bond.

She still skipped work to play with us. There were our famous tennis matches on the parking lot tar about which even my parents didn't complain: They lauded tennis as far more civilised than rugby and signed us up for lessons (the coach euphemised I hadn't achieved the correct "grip" but my mother never failed to forsake me to that deceptively green desert). Constant had his colours, and Johanna challenged him, but instead of rallying within the established parameters, she would shout a sudden creed ("*Kishou*!"[39]) before hitting the ball hard and out of bounds. She would be all puffed up, believing herself to have won, but when we tried to explain, her wide-mouthed grin would obliterate all our objections (our dismay that the ball had been lost in the neighbour's yard), and she would claim authority based on her extensive knowledge and ludicrous admiration of Martina Navratilova: "*Nou daai meid kon speel.*"[40]

Sometimes we sought her out. We liked to hang around while she hung the washing on the line. My brothers would climb the metal poles for a full view of the neighbour's garden, a prime position from which to reach his vine of red grapes (which the top of his head could be seen lovingly pruning most days) or to rile up the barking dog, which would then rile up every dog for ten blocks.

All through the backyard cacophony, I would stand talking to her, if only half-listening to her rants while I picked vanilla pods and blew the seeds in the wind or twisted myself in the sweet-smelling sheets. My brothers, perhaps in the mood to cook up some trouble, and there

[39] A very hard blow.
[40] Now that *meid* could play.

being a limit to the things you can do in a concrete yard, tried to engage her in an evasive game. Constant, as the quickest, would begin to taunt her, her tennis or cricket abilities, to provoke her into giving chase. Not quite dignified or indifferent, she would smile a flushed smile – it seemed boys always had the power of laughter on their side: "*Ek's nie jou speelmaat nie*."[41]

This became a regular warning, funny because, contrary to its dismissal, she proved time and again that she was. It would be obvious that she was close, needed only a little more cajoling, oddly compelled as she was to prove herself one of the boys (tantamount only to exposing me, the little leader, as a weeping girl). Boldly pre-empting their values, she believed that this would gain her, Johanna Katerina Meyer, their respect and admiration.

The most power in this regard went to Constant as the indifferent golden boy, good at athletics, good at sport, good at everything it seemed, and this extended to the rugby field. That day, he dared to go as far as poke her bottom, and that was it: slapping children's feet, followed by an eruption of footfalls no slower for their heavy momentum. She pursued them over the backyard cement, through the clatter of the backyard gate, the garden maze to the church grounds, where they scampered up the tree. They perched up high, where only light-footed boys could reach, and began to shower her with berries plucked from an adjacent tree. On one other occasion, she'd pursued them up there, resulting in a daredevil chase through the latticework of the trees. This time, she stopped at the base without further pursuit. There was an exchange of insults, mostly perverse impersonations of her speech – "Hey, Johanna! *Whatzis-whatzis*?" – and without another word, she disappeared. The boys had begun to celebrate their victory with a feast of berries when a large object whooshed past their heads.

It's a wonder she missed for all the vigour and gall she put into it or that no one lost their balance from surprise. The brick (retrieved from where it held open the backyard gate), launched high and perpendicular – thrown with conviction, like an Olympic shot-putter – came down with a knell, landing at her feet like a botched throw of the dice before splitting in two.

Months later, I discovered the two more or less equal halves in the garden bushes, where evidence habitually got lost (bitten-off doll heads, deflated balls…), and found them again, closer at hand this time, a weapon of a grippable size.

[41] I'm not your playmate.

It's clear she didn't take well to teasing or taunts however light-hearted. ("*Vat jy my vir ´n pop hey*?")[42] But far more disturbing was an old animosity, intangible for all its familiarity, arising as it only can between women. She would be composed, and this being the kind of venom that could only be discharged indirectly, was cloaked in play, or at least, its perversion; in pranks and jokes, in teasing or trickery, in bets and sport, and games of pretend, providing they still assumed the degree of complicity essential to such endeavours, and guaranteeing for their part a unique kind of blamelessness – the sullen retort, all encompassing: "I was only joking—"

Chapter 13: Tootsie

One evening, our parents had a church function and asked Johanna to come in. She resented this to begin with, since, according to her, babysitting did not form part of her job description. They reasoned she should be grateful she got to stay in her *hok* at all – having only to work unpaid on Thursdays – so that she should be happy to help out. She resented this impingement on her free time, no doubt a weekend, more than anything.

Neither party communicated directly, but rather through us. My parents explained gregariously, as if to gain our approval, and Johanna ranted loudly and severely about them, how lazy and stingy they were, how my father wasn't a "real" *dominee*. During these episodes, she might sit us at the kitchen table for hours while she mopped the floor (although this wasn't expressly required), complaining bitterly and theatrically against our parents, fully expecting us to chime in lest we be identified with them (*Hulle…*) in their absence.

That night, we sat fixed to the television while she paraded her booming voice past us – she had never been this bad before. Nevertheless, my brothers thought it was funny when she began to fall around, landing hard with her backside on the metal tracks of the sliding-glass

[42] Are you taking me for a fool?

doors. She laughed along gamely (her gums exposed more readily when she was like this), and at this, a giggle escaped me. A mistake, the insincerity of her cackle becoming evident, a mask to conceal her embarrassment while she got up to show them a thing or two. And most ridiculous of all the expression to justify what came next, "*Ek's nie jou speelmaat nie…*"[43]

And there was the time under the washing line when she *did* catch Constant. The moment apparently dissipated; she'd slapped out her palm as if entirely unprovoked, surprising his wrist in a stiff grip and leveraging it behind his back, twisting it farther and farther while I looked on…

His nimble little body twisted cleverly along, but it was no use (not one to throw a little fishy back, the petty, the unintentional, she ate these things up). She held him there, claiming to have driven his arm to the brink of breakage: she had only to press one final finger increment to sever it entirely. But she kept it there, in the unbearable twisted-up place where the many uncertain angles and ridiculous dances preceding rupture take place – the in-between place where it could still be a game.

I endured this for quite a while before I finally snapped (which had been the point all along). Breaking sharply with the rules of play, I cried out, a cry of defeat because we both knew it wasn't about an arm, not even about my brother. Her physical power, the only power she really had, she did not dare unleash upon me. For all my scraped-knee bravado, I was truly untouchable. But there were other ways of getting at me, and roughhousing with *laaities*[44] could not go nearly far enough. When she finally released him, my brother shook out his arm, laughing along as if it had all been part of the game, and I would be made to feel ridiculous.

While my brothers laughed along with the spectacle, I felt myself become lame, fused to the upholstery. Tootsie, perhaps the only accurate gauge of the situation, shrank back against the chair, peering out from behind my legs as if he knew what was coming. Perhaps I was too protective, soothing him for my own sake, because next she called in a low but unmistakable

[43] I'm not your playmate.
[44] the boys

command: "*Tootsie, kom hier…*"[45] The last syllable was drawn out in such an authoritative trill it vibrated in my pelvis and dislodged something. He knew better than to demur and slipped out between my legs, trotting to her, tail suspended – and the tail said it all, last bit of hope and trust left in its hovering optimism.

Like most of our pets – the displaced tortoise, birds of paradise, chameleons, and fledgling pigeons dropping from whatever irreclaimable nook – Tootsie had seemed to find us. Like those before him, emerging from bushes, crash-landing on the lawn, he came out of nowhere, running down the street and jumping on the base of the Tree to meet us. A shabby mixed breed, half Maltese, half something else, covered in matted black fur, a few flecks on the breast – a "pavement special" as they are known.

He wasn't cute, but he had spirit, that same streetwise autonomy we admired in Rodney and Jeremy, but come nightfall, he didn't return from whence he came, nor did he follow Jaco (who'd fed him) but perched on our *stoep*, producing a low, piercing whine. I watched him through the door, and though I did not want him myself (he was quite scruffy), it was heartbreaking to leave him panting on the other side of the glass. I snuck out there to sit with him, but each time I went inside, the problem only re-established itself, and his whining resumed.

I begged my father to let us keep him, knocked on the door of his study and shifted around, awkward for my emotional appeal. But for some reason, he was intolerant on the matter. I knew well enough not to ask my mother (she got a little hysterical around animals and the messes they made), and so, after much bobbing between two immovable fronts – the dog outside the door, my father behind his desk – they gave in as much as they ever would and suggested I ask Johanna. I remember running to her *hok*, barefoot and pleading. I couldn't believe it when she agreed, how she bathed him in the washroom basin (though this did little to improve his looks) and, in the kitchen, fixed him food, going as far as to buy him a collar the next day. It seemed to bring about no small amount of pride, this dutiful and rough mothering of a street dog.

He lived with us as many years as Johanna, spending his days with us and sleeping in her room at night. We all came to love him, even my mother. He was our mascot, shepherded along

[45] Tootsie, come here…

on adventures and frequently getting into scrapes with bigger dogs. The boundaries of ownership blurred. She fed him, but we bought him treats; she disciplined him, and we doled out affection. Privately we each thought of him as our own, but I think I always knew he belonged to her, the Samaritan that crucial night.

But there were more immediate concerns than scruples over ownership, things that made me wish I'd never asked for her help, that made it clear, in any case, she thought of his body as hers to do with as she pleased, things like punches with fists, like kicks and jibes and pulling out clumps of his hair, like trampling him, swinging him by the tail and marching his limp body through the house.

And even when she stood on his hind quarters, the offending object, his tail, and increased the pressure by degrees, he made no protest but for his low, instinctive whine (perhaps even he assumed it was her privilege). And though that night I screamed and screamed, no holding back now, hysterical like my mother, her only response was a chronic, toothless taunt: "*Waar's jou mammie en pappie nou, hey?*"[46]

And still I begged her like a friend ("*Come on, Johanna!*"), and not once did I try to wrench his body from her grasp, the physical distance between us unbreachable – an absurd boundary now – the stump of the garden wall, and, hiding behind it, an impassive spectator. A boundary that, for all its mundane protection, never made me feel more powerless. And looking back, though I know it's not there, I feel her hand on mine, and it's clenching, only very slowly clenching, her thick brown arm on mine, and it's not quite sore yet, though I can feel its grip, so hard and tense for all its withholding its infinite.

So suddenly and breezily my parents made their entrance, my mother's melodious voice, "Hellloooo," and a superfluous tinkling of the front doorbell, my father's "rap-a-rap, rap-rap" on the blurry glass. By then, we were in the backyard, silent at the door as she paused in her

[46] Where's your mommy and daddy now, hey?

demonstration, her foot suspended above his tail. “Helloo,” my mother’s voice came again. Not above certain conditioning, Johanna strolled into the kitchen and started to pack away some dishes. My parents entered then, my mother still in a glow – she got that way after social contact or a conversation on the phone. “*Dankie*, Johanna,”[47] she chimed and started straightening up in tandem. With little left to do in the way of cleaning, she lingered over some forks, pausing for an abstract moment before shifting gears. Generously, she admonished us to help Johanna with the dishes.

I came in from the backyard then, having sat outside with Tootsie like I had on the night of his arrival and many nights since. I wondered whether my parents might not pick up on something when Johanna pulled something altogether impossible to overlook. Reaching for a high shelf, a stack of dinner plates in her hands, she was on the tip of her toes when Constant ducked into the cupboard below. Perhaps disproportionately annoyed, she banged him over the head with the butt of her load.

He cried out feebly before falling to the floor. My parents had missed the impact, but the aftermath was revelation enough. My mother, who had always been slightly deaf, later recalled hearing a loud *thunk*.

Johanna had broken one plate clean in half and stood over him, dumbly holding the pieces. My mother swooped to Constant’s aid, and when it seemed he would be all right, my father took over with an uncharacteristically curt voice. He ordered Johanna to her room. (It would do no good reasoning with her when she was “like this”.) She protested very little until she reached the backyard. Now she yelled some tearful abuse: My father couldn’t possibly be a “real” *dominee* (Dominee Solly, for whom she worked alternate Thursdays, was a real *dominee*). But of course, it was like hurling abuse at an implacable wall, for my father, the *dominee*, only slightly smiled, much like he’d heard it before, this childlike tirade, this late-night commotion. It was one of those rare times to see it all out in the open, but it wasn’t the revelation it promised: her falling apart and the sobs in her voice or the voice in her sobs. And how was it that suddenly she was the harassed daughter, the victimised girl, and though I could hardly understand it, I could almost feel sorry for her.

[47] Thank you, Johanna.

I stood at the door with my father as he pulled it closed, and I knew the time had come to confess all. As he struggled with the separate halves of the door against the wind, I hung around. While he rattled the latch and the key in the lock I stared at the wooden slats. It should have been easy after this altercation.

"Johannahurttootsie!" The words jumped out of my mouth. He didn't look as shocked as I'd imagined he'd be.

"He looks okay to me…" His voice veered to the affirmative as he leaned for a quick peek through the glass. I made one more effort to condense the horror of the last hours into words, clutching for an example, something, anything concrete: "Bad. She hurt him quite bad."

Having settled the door in its frame, my father turned to pat me on the head, wordlessly consoling me for my own failure of words – marvelling at my little heart as we walked away.

"Poor girl, such a small heart—"

I didn't understand the idiom. It sounded like a deficiency: a tiny glass heart, an embarrassment for its paucity, or tendency to brim over too soon. Though it was true; I'd never understood much about the heart. Jaco said you had to be careful, that you could break it in two, and Jesus forever a' knock-knocking on its door... I wasn't sure how to let him into that metaphorical chamber – or that I really wanted to.

That night, I lay awake, listening for signs, his low whine. At every tree creak, I snapped up and stared, fixing my ears outside the familiar frame, the witchlike branches cupping the moon on this night as though it were the yolk of an egg that might at any moment break apart – disperse like drops of liquid on a too-slick surface. But it was only a bird taking off in the night: owl, crane, midnight nightingale – perhaps Nkosi the duck coming back to grace us with her silence.

On Monday, nothing changed. If anything, we became better at pretending, Johanna that she'd done nothing wrong and us at not remembering. She was more pleasant than ever, and finding her humble voice in the kitchen, I couldn't help but be reassured. That was, until he didn't come home for a day, then two.

(*Loop alweer rond…*)[48]

Tootsie had become well known in the neighbourhood, for no matter how well we domesticated him, what precautions we would take, something of the street always remained, and he would disappear for days, eliciting no more comment than an open-mouthed clicking gum: "Hy loop alweer rond."[49] He usually returned after a day or two, and we had grown accustomed to this. But by the second day, a part of me, of all of us, knew, and though outwardly we assumed the same confidence, the same unconcern, anxiety had crept into even her face.

By the third day (while everyone was out looking), I still pretended, more inactive, it seemed, for every day that passed. And maybe I thought it was better this way: *Had he ever really belonged to us?* My father made reports to my room: nothing yet.

When he finally broke the news, wistful, apologetic, it was as if everyone had known the truth of it for a long time: his body in a gutter at the side of the road. And not far, not far at all, the far side of the church grounds: the eroded edge where it dropped away, that little square of concrete bliss…

And still I saw him roaming the streets like, perhaps, rabbits roamed the countryside. I never went to his body, too afraid of the glassy-eyed stare, the drooping tongue – but why remember so well that indistinct bundle, the upright black fur? Seeing it from afar perhaps, a tragic little heap (*Is that what I think it is?*), having surely seen it – recognised it – half a dozen times that week.

Eventually, someone must have cleared him away, as all unpleasant things were in those days, for the next time I rode by, he was gone. Never buried from what I know, not even in a place in the backyard. A ditch death like Johanna – the death "out there" – the fear of the unknown.

[48] Walking around again…
[49] He's walking around again.

Part 6

The House

Chapter 14: The Plan

They never confronted her. I could not understand this then, but it was as if they saw the end of this way of living – some end point we could not see – and had resigned themselves to coast along this way until they no longer could. Of course, there was the plot of land, the grass square my father had bought on an impulse. An investment, he called it, but he was in love with that empty spot of land, and we would go for visits on Sunday drives to "camp out", to have picnics with ham and cheese and flasks of tea.

There was the usual pretence on a Monday morning: a rustling of cake tins and looking for things in a hurry before school. Johanna too would pretend, although it did not seem like pretending, her smell like iron, reassuring for its authenticity on days like these (like steel wool or the dark green scrub on sponges, like black bags or moss in the early mornings). The mineral stink under all that is clean, but that is not so bad, the grainy smell like the texture of things.

Looking back, the signs were there, clear, sharply focused, but even when it became clear we were to move, build a house of our own – not another *pastorie*, halfway station for the poor – no one really thought about what this would do to her. My father was excited, drawing floor plans, making calculations. It would have been unthinkable to spare the building expense. Perhaps strangest was Johanna's insistence she'd move along. No one said anything to correct her, and I expect we all rather thought it was a convenient way out, out of this arrangement-turned-relationship, laden with need.

Before the first brick was laid on new ground, she came to me with the idea, visibly excited but not overzealous. She must have wanted some sign of approval. The plan was simple but elaborately put forward, told like secrets, in instalments behind the short curtain of the washroom. She would peer out, furtive, before hunkering down to unburden a single hilarious titbit. Then it was back to work until her next disclosure – her work, a charade its own, hustled between confessions.

Bernard had always been the baby, the weakling of the pack, condemned to be *aan*[50] for every game. Pudding *wange*,[51] Johanna chided him, it seemed, since he was born. We used to speculate he was adopted, with his red hair and freckles. And if this wasn't enough, he was always affecting some disability, patched eye, slung arm, and though it was no developmental thing, he insisted on crawling till he was four.

And then there was the crying. He seemed forever to be at it. His face would get red and squished up, and bubbles of foam and spit would come seeping from his mouth or nose. We dubbed it "bubbeltjie-style", these meltdowns, with the indisputable wit of our age, as in: "Oh no, here it comes …" followed by the inevitable "bubbeltjie-style" cry of glee.

The thing was, he was so unselfconscious about himself. He did not cower; he did not try to blend in. He seemed perfectly happy to be as he was. We found this intolerable, along with the ceaseless rivulet of green snot between mouth and nose that my mother had no sooner wiped away than it reappeared, or perhaps it was this: that she was there at the first sniffle.

If Jaco remained Johanna's *seun*, Bernard represented everything she despised. She hated him from the outset, never once coddling him or treating him like the baby he was, expecting more – more than babydom from a baby, it would seem.

It came down to giving him a scare. The plan ended there, quite open-endedly. I didn't ask questions, and if I thought it was somehow pointless for all the effort it would require, I did not show it.

The first obstacle would be the tools: we needed them from the garage, which, by then, had acquired locks, both on the outside – a large manual bolt, difficult to pick without breaking apart – and at the side-entrance from the backyard. We didn't want to secure them too early lest they be missed, so we devised a plan for me to borrow the key and for Johanna to pocket it when I "forgot" it in the lock that evening.

We needed other more commonplace supplies, black bags, shoe-polish, easy enough to

[50] it, as used in a game of tag.
[51] Pudding cheeks.

obtain from the kitchen cupboards, but despite pretensions to the contrary, Johanna would not steal – and with hindsight, I realise that only once something had crossed into her yard (her *cup*) would she put her hands to it.

The stockings in my mother's room presented more of a challenge. Johanna wouldn't even go in there, except, that is, to vacuum up the carpet, her intrusions limited strictly to its surface area. But once I made up my mind to do it, it was easy too. Opening my mother's drawers by degrees, I ascended her closet like a flight of stairs. Underneath her underwear, she kept money, and in her jewellery box I spotted items I had never seen: shell necklaces and bracelets made of semi-precious stone – items from her youth, too kitsch to wear now – treasures to me, enshrined in velvet.

Finally, there were the articles stolen from the ACVV boxes delivered to our door. It felt worse stealing from other people, but these were useless things, rags, and surely no less criminal than my mother's own siphoning off of still-good blouses, a decent pair of shoes. We spaced these small thefts out over many weeks, thus ensuring my parents would never be alarmed, and left for last the snare, crucial to everything else. We recruited Constant for this, although he would not be too much involved – it was our plan after all, our surprise.

There were many late night sessions, not so much planning as howling over details. And if somewhat unsure, I enjoyed the camaraderie, the collective spirit of the mission. It seemed for once that this would really happen.

Weeks passed, then a month, with nothing new, and slowly I came to assume that it was just another exercise akin to late-night gossip, a ritual of laughter or the mockery of others. We had revelled in inaction for so long, not so much planning as going over, playing over the events that had not happened, that I had forgotten what had become a running joke had started as a plan, a plot to be executed in reality.

And this absurd quality suited me; the idea seemed sillier for each repetition – improbable, the product of a bizarre mind and embarrassing for its lack of purpose, of any audience beside my immediate family. It felt strangely uncomfortable, this fact, as if there was no

reason to be doing what we were doing after all, pretending for pretending's sake – though the lack of spectators, of collaborators, suited me too. I had come to think I was too old for elaborate missions.

My father visited the building site daily. He was going to build this house himself. While my brothers took flying leaps from the sand, I walked the foundations, the ditches the house would be built upon. (This room was mine – how small it looked carved out in sand – here lay the kitchen, scarcely a passage.) I took a shortcut across a plank the workers had left; beside it, a hole in the ground: a mixing bowl for Jeremy, *gat-in-die-grond-pampoenkos*.[52]

It was to be an "estate", this quarry of windblown hills, a paradise of cobblestone and beach views, and we returned as if from holiday, greeting her in the hall – a weekly occurrence straddling two shores.

When they broke the news she took it well. No one suspected she assumed she'd move along. If there was a day she found out the full truth I wasn't there. Perhaps it was a gradual awareness, a slow dawning: what spurred her plan into life.

This was in the days following Princess Di's accident, and I trod extra carefully around her. She'd been mourning for weeks, and only nights before, my mother had sent me back to check on her. I'd been shocked by what I found: her *hok* smoke-filled, walls plastered in posters (here she is plump, carrying William, here the modern-day Mary with refugee), her room turned to a shrine. I rarely went back there (the air thick enough to choke), and hearing that song, I knew it wasn't a good time: "*Your footsteps always faaaaall here…*"

Exhaling whorls of smoke, she leaned against the bed and instructed me to open the drawer. My mother's queries forgotten, I inched open the unvarnished wood (handles a thing for previous generations). Inside were a jumble of cartons and tins ("Spangles", one read). She urged me to take a sweet and stopped my hand on a cigarette box. It folded open, leaves of foil intact. Inside: pixel-portraits of William and Harry, neatly clipped, her sons orphans.

[52] Literally hole-in-the-ground pumpkin food.

The next day I came home to find her in a foul mood. Barely a word all day, and though this was not uncommon I made a few attempts at the old familiarity and then reverted to politeness just in case. In the evening, she finally spoke up, recalling our camaraderie as if it had never been in question. “Get everything ready,” she hissed. Thursday would be “the day”.

Thursdays had become a new highlight, “Groceries day”, a wonderful invention since a shopping mall had come to our town, and instead of our weekly sweet drive, we accompanied my father to the hypermarket, where we were guaranteed an assortment of treats.

Donuts, Danishes, hot cross buns, yoghurts in flavours like fudge or bubblegum, sugared cereals in boxes stacked like bricks. This isle, in particular, appealed for the comic-strip illustrations and novelty gifts hidden inside a mountain of colourful flakes.

The first time we had been alerted to the possibility of these extra gifts had been by a series of advertisements that had the same effect on us as arcade games: instant investment. There were repeat performances by characters like Tony the Tiger, Toucan Sam, and Choco the Crunchy Bear, cartoon reels unfurling in fast-forward sequels on desert islands, an abundance of cereal raining into their jungle tree houses, or alternatively, with buried treasure – cereal – in wooden crates.

This had been in the time when dinosaurs were undergoing a revival, with subscription magazines and collectable models that glowed in the dark, and we ate it up, the goggles that would make visible their 3D world. The advertisement showed bountiful jungle and T-Rexes in Technicolour, and I thought – finally – something I could believe in.

This followed several failed holiday attempts to simulate dinosaur lands to my brothers in my cardboard time machine, spinning it around the room a few times with sound effects, lighting, and a lot of tinfoil. As a result, my brothers were slightly more prepared when, following our botched returns, the lights came back on. My parents told me not to expect too much, it was a free gift after all, but I knew what I had seen and assured them it was real.

I opened the box in the back of the car, pulling them out, the cardboard glasses zigzagged with transparent eyeholes: one red, one green. I thought, this can’t be it, and continued digging

around. My parents asked to pass it forward, and quite good humouredly, we all had a laugh with them on. To be fair, I had not figured out that the green and red pictures on the box (so much more drab than the advertisement) were to look at with the glasses – like those pictures you had to squint at – and hadn't I read somewhere (perhaps the back of a Chappie wrapper) that those were the only colours there were: our eyes could only pick up red or green?

At least that left the sugary goodness of the cereal and the other multi-coloured treats, and I decided I would arrange my share nicely on a tray while I watched the afternoon cartoons. But sitting down to my meal, something unresolved suddenly – inconceivably – the sweets were too much, and I made them disappear, quick, absent, submerged in a Ninja Turtle world.

I was inconvenienced that the plan would fall on my favourite day and hoped we would get it over with early so as not to interfere with what had become the most sacred ritual.

Chapter 15: The Worker's Shack

The morning our plan was to be carried out, Johanna came in earlier than usual. I was at the kitchen table, eating cereal. My mother was hovering around. She gave me the knowing, barely concealed smile, toothlessly bit down. She appeared sane and in good spirits, and I eased up a little. Her jaw was tight but not clenched, shoulders hunched and boxy in excitement, and I knew if her shoulders were up like this, it meant she had a grip on herself (it was the slack-jawed indifference to beware of). It would be fun, I told myself, even if it felt like some long-put-off chore's day had finally come around.

After breakfast, still convincing myself it would be alright, I went outside. Our supplies stood ready on her *stoep,* plastic bags sighing softly in the sunlight. The day was sharp and focused, and I had a passive feeling in my head. It was too silly to be doing this. After a while, she came around the corner, a procession of ascending clicks. There would be no room to chicken out

now.

Inside her *hok*, we suited up in front of the mirror, tarnished (like everything in that room) as if by some unspecified but malignant neglect. The stockings, less opaque than I had foreseen, contorted our faces ridiculously, and we laughed that we looked like Mandela with our flat noses and my newly brown skin, though Johanna's nose had always been quite flat. Of her features, it was the only thing of which I knew her to be ashamed. She joked it was as flat as a black person's. She called them *njaba-njabas,* but it was plain she was just dodging the more common derogatory.

Emboldened in our disguise, we armed ourselves with the tools from the garage: Johanna with a saw – one of those oblong manual ones with two sharp sides – but when I look back, I can't make out my weapon of choice. It's not there: a blind spot, a ghost limb.

It was still funny as we shuffled out, and even when we arrived, stuffing ourselves between the rubble, the building materials of that narrow corridor. The worker's shack: that most contracted of spaces from which the hider jumped out – a jack-in-the-box – when too swiftly you did your seeking rounds.

We struggled with ourselves and each other to be quiet inside that crack, and finally stifled, we wait.

As the wait drew out, we bore up well under the smell that was not a smell but indistinguishable from the orange gravel under our feet, the concrete of the shack, and Etwit's maimed overalls suspended above our heads, as if growing too out of the weeds and *suurings*[53] which our mother scolded us for chewing, since dogs made a habit of lifting their legs against the long yellow-flowered grasses. My comfort starts to wear thin: packed in with construction materials, pipes, raw cement, firewood, crates, empty pot plant containers, also realising I'm holding an urge to pee, I'm reminded of how I used to set traps to catch sparrows in the backyard.

It came down to a waiting game, stationed behind the back door, and though I could not have been more committed, I never really believed it would work. (The conspiracy to do

[53] Small, sour-tasting plant often chewed by children. Name literally means "sourlings".

something, it seems, has always been enough for me.)

I'd set up a washing basket with plastic net and stand it on its mouth with a Y-shaped twig. To this, I tied a long fine string and lead it to my position behind the door. I'd scatter breadcrumbs in a trail, at first wide and visibly, but then concentrated in the trap. Then I waited, excited every time a bird ventured into the yard. Sometimes I grew impatient and made adjustments; other times, it would be a false alarm if the wind blew it shut – the clamour of an empty victory crashing down annoyingly often.

Everyone held that swallows were bad birds. Slick like their mud nests, presumably dirty with lice, and yearly, we destroyed their little huts in the corners of our *stoep* – even the workers recommended we kill the chicklets we sometimes found on the grounds. No one was sorry for a dead or abandoned baby swallow.

Until, one day, I pulled the twine, and though my trap was slow and awkward to fall down, I had caught one. I yelped in astonishment – quick – for someone to come see. Fluttering inside, difficult in fact to be sure: a swallow. Soon its fluttering grew so desperate inside that barrel I had to sit on it to hold it down. With no one to witness my clever trick and unable to move, I started to feel sorry for it – unsure what to do that I had it, though having it had been exactly what I'd planned.

Just then, Bernard appeared, skipping improbably onto centre stage, the gravel square under the pecan nut tree, manipulated forward by Constant's encouragement, loud in the morning light. I remember seeing him, unaware of our voyeurism, embarrassingly fragile in his own little world. His velvet hair was too soft in the sunlit breeze, darting around, running spasmodically to and fro – what went on in his little head, I sometimes wondered. He studied carefully each nut, a conscientious little sparrow, holding them to the light. We couldn't have watched him very long, but this moment of absolute unselfconsciousness is drawn out.

Even now, there is a tiny bit of revulsion, a cruel humour bubbling up inside. Laughing at the funny picture of him at *Ouma's* house, the forward tilt of one shoulder, mouth contorted in a cocky smile: blotchy and tearful but confident all the same. We used to crack up uncontrollably. Irrepressible laughter, every time I chose my laughter over whatever feelings he might have,

laughing sometimes until he cried.

This moment of wild hilarity is the moment we leap out from our hiding place. Johanna roared out from the shack, but the sound coming off her was a hissing – subvocal, the release valve of a bike, or the sound a snake would make if you squeezed the air from its breast (jaws pressed open, fangs exposed).

It was happening hard and fast. She was agile, not like a maid in her work dress. She was muscular and lithe, a bushman woman.

And now his face crumpled and shrieked, but it was only a flash before his head too was turned and gone. And it's real. He's terrified knowing it's us.

The pounding of heels drown out other sounds, the pounding, her feet or mine, stained with the day's dirt or tar (hers with a rim of chalk around the soles). It is the sound of scattering birds and taking the clothes off the line before it rains. It is the sound of dusk and grey afternoons. It has overtaken the sounds of these things too. It is faint and dull but loud in the ear. It redoubles in false starts and echoes; it disappears – grows louder as it pretends to leave.

Away: getting away without being caught. Crashing harder and harder but light as a nymph the harder you allowed yourself to fall. And even if it was just a game – the idea of someone behind, someone coming up from behind, though I was invincible when I was the pursuer – sheer will was what powered my limbs. If I willed them to be faster, they were.

And this is the poverty of silence, of speed, and only the bottoms of feet are sustained. The sort of hardened pools of blackened blood, indistinguishable from the tar it treads.

That day, she outran me. All I hear is the pounding, her feet or mine. I don't know what she's doing, only that she's an unstoppable forward force, tissue cells screaming one irrevocable purpose. I don't hear my brother shrieking. I don't see the blood. I don't look into her face (those bulging eyes). The metal of the garden gate clamps lightly shut, and I'm on the other side, and I know, I know what's happening, and I'm not fast enough.

Chapter 16: The Pastorie

To come home to its carpeted safety would never happen anymore. We left that place long before we really left. Inevitably, it calls me back, sometimes against my will, a child gripped by the arm and dragged across the heat of the carpet, to the bathroom, where punishment was dealt out. Who would have guessed my mother's veined hands held such strength?

I go back, go over it like I'm missing something important, for something that could fill out the blankness, that kind of nothing (privileged, encamped) that collapses in guilt.

I climb the bookcase of my father's study, a rock wall on all sides, a world its own, apparently without the laws of gravity – paradise of built-in cupboards – that contain anything, anything at all. I finger, without picking up, elaborate items: a photo-slide viewer, "paintings by number", monuments in miniature, instructional books in "full colour", a true-to-scale replica of a European station with cardboard fold-outs, yet to be assembled in 3D parts (complete with model passengers), uneaten cake, the morose face of a clown preserved in its plastic, its only companion a milk-container elephant, stale popcorn suspended inside. There are watercolours, vinyl records, comics from the 1950s, and most conspicuously, a velvet pillowcase embroidered with a date and place ("November 1984, Nababeep"), a stork gift from the Northern Cape congregation – everything from the time *before*. (Before making off for greener pastures and provinces as soon as I was born). The cupboards contain a paperweight monument to every period of my father's life, though in no order that can be retraced.

On the far side of the cupboards and within easy leaping distance stands a large metal filing cabinet. It is pale and green and cool to the touch, refusing to warm up when I sit with my back to it (eerie cold like the lead in pencils probed with my tongue). It is locked, but I find the key in a desk drawer along with staples and paperclips and other small metal things (along with the torn-off stubs of cheque books arranged neatly in rows, all filled with my father's meticulous uppercase scrawl).

The drawers roll out on steel hinges and contain stacks of yellow cardboard folders, faded

with age, swelling like concertinas on worn metal innards. Each has a rigid plastic tab like a side-ways “l” and house exemplars of my father’s handwriting. I can’t make out the tiny characters and flip disinterestedly through the pages, but when I slide open the bottom drawer, it is heavy, filled to the brim with glossy hardcover books.

They are stacked on their sides to the back of the compartment and into the casing itself, and I think it must be a secret compartment – a “false-backed” drawer from the movies. All the books bear my father’s name, and when I open one, there is an inscription in front addressed to my brother. Opening one after the other, I encounter the same phenomenon, letter after letter clearly meant for our older selves, all these unread books, their pages of unexpressed love, and when I page through one and read my own name, I recoil in shock. Restacking the store-new books in their drawer and closing it hard against its steel, I remember to relock and hide the key – leaving everything as I had found it, unmoved.

I hadn’t found what I was looking for.

(Replica after replica, an unthinkable array of surfaces, furry or shimmering, puffy or glow in the dark, embossed in anime angles or sheer with metallic hues and organised thus. I was rich, richer than anyone in the neighbourhood, my collection traded and re-traded until it spanned a population, a zoo – folded carefully between protected pages – an Atlantis lost that day.)

Besides its direct link to the past, the room had the kind of emptiness that was renewable: a black hole at the centre of our home. And every night before I went to bed, I continued to believe, held it as a certainty, that one of these days I would find it there, under a fine polish of dust, my most cherished and long-lost possession: my sticker album (though I was fairly certain I’d lost it playing outside).

Perhaps this is the beginning then, of my miniature’s phase – the most dedicated and enduring of my many phases.

I made up my own drawer as if in revolt, perched on the margin at the back of his drawer. I sat under his desk, my own private den, keeping my secrets in the heart of his secret.

I made my own book, white squares of paper guillotined and stapled at the margins – a

publishable book in miniature. Instead of playing outdoors, I began to stay inside, building houses, houses within houses. And if I ventured outside, it was only to find specimens to inhabit these vessels. I dreamed in miniature, I ate in miniature, and if my father made a braai and complained about the ants, I prepared a meal for the intruders themselves.

I took my miniatures to school, only mildly embarrassed for the little station at my desk, the miniature fries and burgers made from ingeniously folded paper. The other kids thought it was strange, but bored enough, they tried to imitate me, giving up when it came to the really minute. My fingers seemed better equipped to deal with trifles. I had a patience for these things.

The study is the space of seriousness and perhaps I want to violate it. Along with the pink sitting room, they constitute the public zones of the house (that could be cordoned off, with industrial curtains, with locks, during visits from the congregation). Both rooms are fronted on one side (the church-facing side) by large picture windows. How strange that I don't remember Johanna cleaning those rooms, vacuuming the carpet certainly, the prehistoric ferns were afflicted with a kind of incurable sickness that made them break out and shed in little cataracts from beneath their leaves. She would take care of the plants and scrub the windows, but no real time would be spent in these spaces.

I may have been looking (however vaguely), for some refutation of my father's *dominee* persona, or for the converse, a clue to his humanity: between the staples and fountain pens, embellished letter openers, drawers of empty chequebooks (records inside balanced and in order), everything so precise, so modest, and yet the books in the drawer, not one of which I ventured, with titles like: *God in die Huwelik, Die Lig en die Woord, Dogmatiek*[54].

That room with its abundance of clocks, clocks with intervals as abstract as the lines that dictated them or with chiming ditties at every quarter that startled my quiet indoor games. When members of the congregation came to visit, they rang the bell and entered with their heads ducked. I wondered what they talked about in there. When I listened at the keyhole, I could distinguish "*Kom ons bid*",[55] at which point, I checked myself. One time, I stayed too long, and the pauses, the great periods that extended between my father's words – like church, making one

[54] *God's Role in the Marriage, The Light and the Word, Dogma.*
[55] Let us pray.

doubt they would come – were like silence eternal, metronomed by the clock's muffled ticking – as natural as crickets under the great still moon. And once I saw him kneeling in there. This disturbed me greatly, seeing my father bowed like a child.

This was the privileged relationship I held with my father. He could be an officious man but I was always able to warm him up, to tease him, to access his humorous side. I was casual with him, I pushed the boundaries of what I could get, what I was allowed to say. And only on rare occasion did he deny me, taking my mother's side instead. This would stun me, terrify me to the bone, and I would feel the need to urinate press painfully, but I held it all in: my fear of his voice, how it could cut through me; my own stubborn chilliness when I turned away, withholding my affection, my conversation for hours until he apologised or made up for it somehow. When I found his love infallibly behind the veneer, his vulnerability overwhelmed me and I recoiled. It was push and pull, the motion of those too close.

I searched my mother's cupboards too, browsed her jewellery: pearls bracelets and barely there gold or silver chains, broaches with Victorian faces or little Dutch shoes with drawings of windmills. Of what must have been a meagre collection, I assumed everything to be real: real gold, real silver. Semi-precious stones were emeralds.

I must have been doing this for a long time, since I was a baby, because once, browsing these same things, I mistook a penny with the face of the queen for a prized sweet and promptly ingested it, nearly ending my short life in the process.

I still have it, incidentally – covered in a kind of green algae – fished out of my oesophagus by the emergency doctor after what must have been an agonising ride to the hospital. My mother kept it pressed in an album (a memento of what milestone I can hardly say) like a baby tooth or piece of shrivelled umbilicus.

This episode didn't deter me, I rummaged her closet for hours, the bulk of her dresses, the lumps of her shoes, a heap – it must have been every shoe she'd walked in in her life – worn-out leather shells or colourful pumps with heels from her university days. I liked the smell, floral (the motif of overwhelming choice for her dresses), and if my brothers were looking for me, they'd

never find me, obscured by a wall of fabric, dirty feet tucked into a pair of her shoes

Once, I was searching when she burst into the room. She didn't like me in there sliding things off their hangers, and instinctively I froze. As she came closer, I became nervous; would she see me peering out between her things? It wouldn't be so bad, I rationalised, to be discovered, but now that I had hidden I knew it was somehow different. She came closer yet as if choosing a dress, hands grazing the swaying fabric, and I knew I was seeing her as she really was – the fear, the terror, of coming face to face with my mother – but she's browsing only superficially and lingering a second, turns to leave, leaving nothing but a stirred-up floral breeze.

Of all the compartments and enclaves of that house – the shower stall, the second TV room, the baby cot and *deurgee*[56] from kitchen to dinner table, the courtyard – built around a vacancy – not one contained more than a hint of what was going on inside. The centre would have to be outside.

[56] Literally translated as "give-through". A through pass used to pass food from the kitchen to the dining room.

Part 7

Die Hok

Chapter 17: Bergies

When I came upon them in the garden, she was on top of him, straddling his chest. She had one of his arms stretched on the ground and the other pinned down with her knee. In her free hand, she was bearing down on his arm with the saw. There was a moment where I was unsure if she meant to cut him or if this was part of the scare. Then I saw her face, the stocking ripped off, and in its place a look more terrible than any mask. His shrieks intensified and just as suddenly ceased. I became aware of Constant in my periphery (he must have scaled the fence behind me).

We moved as one to our brother. Johanna had tossed the saw in the grass and was bent over him, breathing heavily. In the distance, a chorus of dogs started barking.

"Johanna?" I heard myself asking. We'd moved to her side and could see Bernard, lifeless as a corpse, red spots blossoming in his cheeks. Constant and I exchanged a look, and I took a step forward and tapped her on the shoulder. I immediately jumped back. When that had no effect, I summoned my loudest voice: "Johanna, get UP!" Johanna got up like a sleepwalker and picked up the saw where it lay. That's when I noticed something else lying beside it in the grass. Curled up like a pupa: Bernard's left pinkie finger.

Johanna lumbered down the garden path (to return the saw to the garage, I later found out), and we were left standing. I was suddenly very aware that I was the eldest. I bent down and was relieved to find that he was breathing. "Get a towel, quick!" I snapped at Constant. The stump where Bernard's finger had been was bleeding a steady stream, and I meant to slow it, but before I could touch him, he woke up screaming: "Water, waaaater!"

Constant returned with an embroidered hand towel from the guest bathroom, and Bernard held out his injured limb but wouldn't let me touch him. He wrapped his own hand feebly, lay back down, and promptly resumed his screams for water. Knowing he probably needed ice or some other form of first aid, I nevertheless ran for water, and when I returned, he took the plastic cup with shaking hand and drank a few sips. He wanted to dunk his bleeding hand in the cup, but I stopped him. I saw the towel was soaked through and knew it was time to fetch an adult. "Stay here, I'm gonna get help," I instructed Constant, who, like me, seemed to be operating in a kind

of trance.

With both parents out and Johanna gone who knows where, I ran across the street. I rang the neighbours' bell and waited behind the trellis door while it bleared an electric tune. When the lady came, she had curlers in her hair, and all I could manage were a few jumbled sentences. Somehow she grasped my meaning and, grabbing a scarf, followed me across the street.

We arrived the moment my parents turned into the drive. Scarf tied around her pin-cushion head, the lady (Coley, I believe she was called) saw she wasn't needed and bowed a grateful exit. I was suddenly very aware of what I was wearing. My own head covering was missing, and my black bag garb had torn, but I was covered in shoe polish and other manufactured dirt. My parents had returned to the scene of the crime, but the culprit was gone.

Gone too was the weapon, and to explain what had happened without it, to my twelve-year-old brain: impossible – this between my father's demands of "What the hell is going on here?" and my mother's wails of "Why are you dressed like that? You look like a bloody *bergie*!"[57] In the rush to get him to the car, they forgot the most important thing: someone had to get out to retrieve his pinkie. And still I felt a sense of relief. I wasn't the eldest; Johanna wasn't the eldest. My parents were back in the driver's seat.

During the drive to the hospital, I broke down. I'd managed to get out that it was Johanna who'd maimed him (God knows what they thought before that), and now my parents had a car full of screaming children, because the shock had worn off and Bernard could acutely feel the loss of his digit. And though Constant did his silent cry (open-mouthed, tearless: "Hiiiiiiieeeehhh") I let it all out: the years of pent up anxiety, of keeping watch, of not tattling. I'd always had a notion of her revenge ("*Hardloop alweer na mammie en pappie toe hey?"*[58]) and never uttered a word against her. Even after that night in the kitchen when my mother enquired if Johanna had drunk the cleaning spirits (or worse: smoked *dagga*), I avoided her gaze and simply shrugged my shoulders. My loyalty was irreproachable.

[57] hobo
[58] Running to mommy and daddy again?

My father had the hazards on and drove through a red robot. Bernard was cradled in my mother's lap in the front seat, and she held his hand like a wounded bird, alternately kissing and blowing and soothing. She turned around now to comfort her two oldest children: "*Toemaar Boeta, toemaar Sissa, alles verby*,"[59] but her maternal words hardly made a dent and we were inconsolable the entire way to the hospital.

I had a moment with my father in the waiting room while my mother was in with Bernard for a scan. Constant had tagged along; he was loath to leave her side. Things had settled a bit since the doctor had determined he would keep the finger.

Now my father turned his attention to me. "How long has Johanna been terrorising your brothers?" He was using a patient voice, but I felt the intensity behind it.

I tried to think back. In a physical sense, there had only been a handful of times where I'd truly feared for their safety, but in a much more pervasive sense, the unacted threat had been there from the start (I'd lived with the spectre of violence so long it seemed almost normal). It was in every sidelong look, in every muttered insult ("*windgat klong*"),[60] her most mundane gestures (pumping her fist into an open palm).

It reared its head when our parents were out or she got them alone in her room. (I got reports of wrestling matches and dirty magazines.) It was there, the day under the washing line, when she finally caught Constant (surprising his wrist in a stiff grip). It was there the time she launched a brick at them or brought the plates down on his head. It was in every late-night telling of "*die nag van die lang messe*" or in the story of Tannie Marie. It erupted the night with Tootsie and any time her pride was injured, her abilities questioned. Most of all, she used them to get to me. They were only guileless players caught in the middle: pawns, shields of meat.

"I don't know." I tried to squirm away, not wanting to lie outright to my father. I still wasn't convinced he'd actually get rid of her. When he pressed the issue, I started to whimper, guilty that I hadn't done more to thwart her. If anything, I'd been Sancho Panza to her Don Quixote, complicit in my own demise.

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[59] Calm down Brother, calm down sister, it's over now.
[60] Arrogant boy

"Why didn't you say something to us?" Strangely enough, in many ways, I thought they already knew.

When we returned from the hospital, my father searched for Johanna, banged on the door of her room. It was locked, but he bellowed some threats through the door: she'd better clear out, he'd called the police! I went with him and witnessed the hollow reverberations, empty threats to an empty room. If she was in there, she didn't let out a peep. He repeated the procedure every few hours, but later that night, placed a call to the *koster* with his bunch of jangling keys.

I often wondered why they hadn't called the police. Perhaps it had something to do with my father's position, the scandal of it (*What would the congregation say?*). Or perhaps it was because the police weren't worth much by those days. Stranger still, I had a feeling it was her position in the household, that in some roundabout way, they were protecting her. It was a family matter.

When we got inside her room the next morning, it was scrubbed of all human trace. No Dawn cream on the dresser, no teddy bears clutching candy hearts. Her black and white TV on the closet top was unplugged (she preferred it, she claimed, couldn't stand the sight of blood). The closet stood open, bare but for some metal hangers that chimed against each other at the slightest touch, and a woolly blanket, satin seams coming apart.

My mother started a bitter catalogue of the damage, scratches to my grandma's dresser that would need re-sanding, a few cigarette burns on the peeling linoleum. One of the porcelain tiles was chipped in the bathroom, and the toilet was seatless but had started its life that way. The only remnant of her was a sliver of Lux beauty soap (she liked the advert, Hunter Tylo feeling like a "natural woman"). I was left to wonder how she'd made her exit. Under the cover of night, balancing the contents of her life on her bike?

My father escorted my mother to the house before she could get too worked up. The doctor had prescribed something for the shock, and my father suggested a lie down before they returned to the hospital. She'd spent the night, and the carting around between hospital, specialists, and physiotherapy would take a toll and was to continue for weeks.

I returned to her room for several consecutive days. The door stood open, latch banging absently against the frame. Some dried leaves and debris had blown in and were scattered in a pattern across years of uncovered sediment (the layers of peeling paper corresponding to an untold number of inhabitants) finding its bedrock of cement in cracks and filaments that resembled the branches of a tree. I couldn't believe how derelict the place suddenly seemed. (I still half expected to find her there.) I crouched under the bed and scanned the linoleum, looking for some remnant I'd missed the first time, some knick-knack or keepsake that could be interpreted as a sign. After walking the room's perimeter, tracing the walls for cracks or crevices where messages could be plugged, and finding nothing, I took to sitting cross-legged in the centre.

I sat there, singing to myself or having muted conversations with the barren walls (which, only weeks ago, were plastered in posters of Diana). Without drapes or bedding, the walls had a faint echo, and I could make out the traces of cellotape (like the ghost trails left by snails) or the greasy imprints of Presstick. (She used to take the oversized gobs behind pictures and calendars and pinch some off before returning the diminished blobs to their corners.) It became a habit, returning to her *hok* to poke around. I inspected the little yard, the ailing fig tree and pot plants, and once, I used the toilet. Besides, I needed somewhere to go; my parents had started looking at me differently, a little too closely, and since Bernard returned from the hospital, I avoided playing indoors.

After flushing the toilet one day, I went outside and heard water rushing under a cement outcropping where the plumbing flowed through. I'd neglected to check there during my search effort, and now I lifted the concrete slab, not knowing what, if anything, I was hoping to find.

Finding nothing of significance besides rushing water, I replaced the lid and sat on top of it, defeated. The outcropping had served as a seat during the days of her infamous *braai's* (our mother continually bemused by the coloured maid who *braaied* for white children). On special Sundays or public holidays, all the neighbourhood children would gather in that enclosure. We attended willingly, though the draw wasn't necessarily the flame-grilled chicken or tinfoil-housed potatoes. We were more interested in whether or not she'd procured a litre or two of granadilla Schweppes (fizzy cooldrink still a rarity in those days). Schweppes was her drink of

choice, and ours right behind Coca Cola, and when she uncovered it from the shopping bag with a magician's flourish, we served ourselves modestly in Styrofoam cups or took turns to swig directly from the bottle.

I got up suddenly to sift through the undergrowth by the fig tree, having given up looking for vanilla pods or flowers to dismantle (the season for grapes also well and truly over, all the surrounding foliage dead and heaped in the corner). I scratched around in the earthy muck and almost immediately found what I was looking for, tucked under the tree: her "*potjie*".[61]

It was made of some heavy metal (why she'd left it behind, I presumed) with spikes for legs and hand-moulded grooves around the middle, though she loved that ancient receptacle (a witch's cauldron) and fancied herself something of an aficionado with it. If it wasn't chicken on the open coals, she would slice up vegetables and potatoes and add them in layers to stock (stoking the flames or lifting the lid as required with a metal rod). This was her element, and though we weren't overly enthused by the mixed-up fare, we partook respectfully in this communion (everyone notified long before the hour: "I'm making *potjiekos* on Sunday"). We sat cross-legged around the dying embers, eating more or less straight from the pot, fishing out whole carrots or zucchinis (Jaco perhaps more enthusiastically than the rest of us), and when it was over, she'd take me out back to fetch some newspapers. Cleaning it with anything else, she claimed, diminished years of built-up flavour.

I touched it now, this cast-iron sputnik, like something from another era, and sure enough, it was covered in a kind of oily patina (I seem to remember her oiling even the outside with canola oil). I lifted the lid, and nestled inside were balls of newspaper, like dumplings. I dragged it back to the enclosure and put it in the centre of the quadrant, pondering it from my rocky outcrop, not sure what to do with it.

I returned the next day with a few dolls. I set off with my bike as usual, parked it on the grounds, and traced my steps back to the garage, along the garden of neglected Christmas roses (their fragrance of rot and shade), where I used to knock and wait, and even if she was indoors, she'd come outside and shimmy the bolt. I found that like the garden fence, even without footholds, this gate could be scaled with my growing limbs. I gripped the ledge and walked its

[61] A potjie is a cast iron pot used to cook over a fire.

incline until I could swing one leg over its precipice, positioning myself, I took a giant leap and landed on the concrete with a smack.

Her *hok* and the little yard became my play house, never having had a doll house of my own, nor having shown much interest in dolls per se (or in regular girl's games: "let's play house-house"). I had a baby doll of course. "Cindy", she was called, after another girl's doll (even at that age, I didn't want to stand out), and I perpetuated the role, rocking her to sleep, carrying her around like a hostage. Little did anyone know, but I despised that doll, squished its head in when no one was looking.

Now I unpacked my guests from their carriage (a ratty backpack, perhaps the same one used to chauffeur Tootsie). They were a motley crew, my dolls, variously gifted from ladies in church (originally crocheted for children in Malawi) or scrappy ragdolls that had survived from my baby days. Yet others were remainders from my mother's own girlhood. I arranged them like a Mad Hatter's tea party and prepared a feast (leaf and nettle soup, leaf skewers, and meatballs). I even found an old broom and swept the hearth.

I remember reading years later about how the mothering instinct can be seen in girls across cultures. In African cultures, girls tie their dolls to their backs and cook make-believe dinner in tin cans over make-believe flames. Did it take her leaving to reach this stage of development, or had I always emulated her? Perhaps it was that rarest of commodities: space. All the same, it was in this way, and quite late, that I came to the rituals of womanhood.

One day, I smacked down on the concrete to find the room had been bolted back up. The broom, pot, and other domestic oddities had been cleared away. My days of restful sanctuary were over.

Bernard returned from the hospital after a few days with his arm in a sling and a metal guard around the finger. They'd joined it below the knuckle, a gnarled seam where he'd lost all feeling. The doctor said he was lucky she'd severed it clean, without trauma to the important arteries. He walked around with the iron splint for months but had to return for regular tune-ups of its metal components.

I approached him more cautiously than ever. My parents treated him like he was made of glass and practically force-fed him ice cream. For each difficult day or bandage change, there was a bribe in the form of sweets or a new toy. He bore his new handicap with fortitude, but there were times when he was weepy, especially around the hour he had to take his pills (he struggled to swallow the oversized tablets, and my mother had to cut them into smaller pieces). He also regressed around bed and bathroom routines. We never made fun of him, and I ceased any previous semblance of teasing or trickery (my habitual "jokes" of hiding under his bed at bath time to laugh at his nakedness or stuffing our scariest doll, "Baba May", under his covers). And yet he was jumpy around me.

The pinkie is considered the least essential digit, ornamental, sticking out daintily when sipping tea. In reality, it represents fifty percent of the hand's gripping strength, second in indispensability only to the thumb. Without it, certain actions become near impossible. Gripping a tennis racket, for instance. It didn't matter that he was right handed; the sheer possibility of having hampered his talent became a subject of much ire.

My parents sat in the living room at night and speculated about her whereabouts. It was nearing winter, and we sat by the fire. They'd called around, looking for her, had tried Dominee Solly, Tannie Marie, and one or two of her old employers (though if this included Babsie, I very much doubted) but no one had seen or heard from her. They speculated about her moving in with a friend. I could tell by the way they said "friend" that they meant a man, but the only friend of hers I knew about was Brenda, whom she occasionally mentioned and who sometimes stayed over without my parents' knowledge. "She'll have gone back to Khayelitsha or Lwandle," they predicted.

I knew these names as places for poor people (perhaps in the same abstract way that people overseas think of Africa ("Eat your peas; there are children starving in Khayelitsha") and had only seen them through the window of a moving vehicle. I thought of her huddled in corrugated zinc and couldn't take the idea seriously. But what was left if she wasn't with us, a friend or employer?

She had no family to speak of (she was proud of the fact that she was an only child, mentioned it frequently), though her paternity remained a mystery. I considered the old lady at

the bottom of the street, perhaps a distant relation, a long-lost auntie or cousin? She'd looked roughly the age Johanna's mother would have been if she'd lived. But I never saw her again, and as far as I knew, Johanna didn't visit. Besides, there was a limit to what one could get away with as an illegal sub-tenant in someone else's backyard.

Hypnotised by the flames, my mind wandered to the times I'd seen her familiar with beggars and others less fortunate. I thought of the times we ran errands in town and she stopped to talk to the *bergies* in the municipal gardens. She seemed to have a kind of kinship with everyone we passed, nodding to the workers in their government-issue overalls, but especially with the loiterers, pausing to roll a cigarette (she used newspaper when she ran out of her customary red and gold Courtleys).

She was generous, crouching against the sidewalk to shake tobacco directly from the packet. There seemed to be a sense of camaraderie, an unspoken alliance between her and these people, and I marvelled at my previous ignorance of this. I'd never considered that *bergies* were by definition a special category of homeless, a little wilder, more weather worn and accustomed to outdoor living (because of a continual state of inebriation, they were also prone to sleeping in less-than-optimal conditions: a hollowed out bush, an unclaimed stretch of pavement or traffic circle). Universally older, grizzled (I'd seldom heard a child or youth referred to as a *bergie*), they nevertheless possessed a canny talent for scavenging and appropriation – there was no end to their decked-out shopping carts, their crude blanket and cardboard constructions. Most notable was their language. It had a swing to it, a knack for insults or profanity, whole litanies of rhyming couplets fired off at the slightest whiff of offense. (Like when I made an assumption – *ek't gedog* – and Johanna fired back: "*Dog het gedog hy poep en toe kak hy in sy broek*.")[62]

If she wasn't with a friend or relative, or holed up in a shack somewhere, had she joined their ranks? Sheltering under a concrete overpass when it rained (around the glow of a barrel fire) or spread out on the rolling grass by day? To my addled brain, this seemed the preferable alternative (like rabbits roaming the countryside, like Tootsie frolicking on the farm). Was it inadvertent, or had she predicted her own homeless fate?

[62] A crude saying that has the same meaning as "When you assume you make an ass out of you and me."

Johanna returned some days later. When I peered through the viewer, I didn't recognise her at first. Her hair stood up in every direction, and she was dressed in several uncoordinated layers. Stooping slightly, she seemed to cradle something reflective under her shirt. She rang the bell a second time and stood up close, breathing though the door. My mother was in the kitchen, and when I told her who it was, shouted to ignore it; my father wasn't home to deal with her.

I returned to the door, and though it was locked, I slowly engaged the manual bolt. She must have heard, because she pressed her head against the blurry glass, shielding her brow with both hands. "I know you're in there!" she shouted. Her command, when it came, sounded ragged: "Open up. Don't just stand there with your finger in your arse!"

She tried the doorknob, but when it didn't turn all the way, started jiggling it till it shook the door in its frame (which, in turn, shook the glass). At that point, I thought something would give; it seemed the whole house was trembling.

When the shaking finally ceased, I heard footfalls, somehow too emphatic on the patio tiles, followed by utter silence. I knew the trick, and sure enough, when I peered through the viewer, she was pressed up close, barely containing her mirth. Losing patience, I saw her strut to the wall and ring the bell. After sounding it a few times, she tried to hoist herself to the kitchen vent, and when she couldn't reach, returned to the bell, pressing it again until she realised holding it in worked just as well.

I watched through the viewer as she scrambled up the ledge and slid down. My mother must have heard her huffing and manoeuvring outside the window, because she felt moved to shout something: "Go away, Johanna! I'm calling the police!" She slammed the window and engaged the bolt (though there was no risk of a person fitting through). Passing me outside the kitchen on her way to her room (she'd been lying down a lot in the days since the incident), my mother fixed me with a glare. "Don't open the door for anyone except your father."

Johanna was quiet for a moment, and I thought perhaps she'd been chastened, but hardly a minute passed before the bell started up again and didn't stop. The endless loop of the bell seemed to stir something in her, and she started hurling accusations in half-sobs: "Don't think you'll get away with this! I know people at the *magistrate's*!" She was pacing, working herself

up to something. "*Suinig, bang-gat – dominee se poes*!"[63] She paused, seemed to steady herself against the marble pole, and sank against it to her haunches. When she collapsed, the mostly empty sack of wine tumbled from under her dress like a silver afterbirth. *Papsak*:[64] drink of choice of *bergies*.

I don't know how long she sat there. I left her, back turned to the viewer, returning only when I heard her wailing. She had taken to lying on the doormat. The wind picked up and carried the sound of her wails through the jamb until it was hard to separate one kind of wailing from the other. I sat with my back against the door until my father came home, and by then, she was gone.

Chapter 17: The Deep Blue

My father returned with the boys from the grocery store to find me slumped against the door (my brothers were old enough to advocate in my interest – strawberry, bubblegum, Lunch Bar, not Bar One). The grocery isles had lost all appeal for me since our Thursday misadventure. The door opened inward and jammed against me when he tried to press it (like when I slammed the door to my room and sat sulking behind it).

"Why are you sitting *there*?" he asked, oblivious to what had transpired. I stuck my head outside, looked both ways, but there was no sign of her. He must have sensed something awry, because he went straight to my mother. She conveyed the events of the last hours in muffled tones, but when my father emerged from the room, he was incensed. "When will that woman get the message!" He slammed the door, but it was swollen due to the weather and only made a kind of whooshing catching on the carpet.

I peered through the crack and saw my mother "putting her face on" as she called it. I was always a little startled by the difference between my mother's two faces, especially the one

[63] Stingy, scaredy cat – fuck the pastor!
[64] A sack of wine, usually bought cheaply in large quantities.

without makeup. When I was younger and saw her barefaced, I thought she was a witch (may even have confided this in a friend). The distinction wasn't limited to her appearance; she behaved differently in each instance. Behind closed doors and drapes she had no quibbles shouting and remonstrating, but for the outside world, she was the incarnation of sweetness. The previous congregation had compared her to Diana.

I played with my miniatures while my father made some phone calls in his study (though whether he was arranging his evening *huisbesoek*[65] or something more sinister pertaining to Johanna, I'll never know). It would be dinner soon, and my brothers were already in the tub. I was avoiding the evening ritual, half-ducked under the wooden table, deciding the fates of my tiny heroes. I'd recently caught on to the "Puppy in my Pocket" craze and no longer had to craft my own figures. They came in "lucky packets" (though there was a little transparent window to peer through), with names like Fifi and Trixie and I was running through the alphabet trying to collect them all (though I was painfully aware I was a little old for such ambitions).

Johanna had been the only one who'd shared my enthusiasm for such endeavours and called all trifles by the same name, "*tierlantyntjies*"[66]. She too kept fluffy secrets in matchboxes and exhibited curio figures on her dresser, shell people with googly eyes. I wondered what had happened to these creatures. At two or five rand at the Deep Blue, they'd been quite the expense. I continued my game and put to rest questions of destiny by staging an epic showdown – "there can be only one" – like Duncan MacLeod in *Highlander*.

Before I could finish the game, my mother called for us to set the table: "*Etenstyd*!"[67] Each of us habitually took care of one element, glasses, plates, cutlery, and I knew better than to ignore this simple request. Unlike most of our friends, we didn't have to run through a ration of chores for our weekly allowance. This negligible task, along with unloading the dishwasher, was the brunt of it, and pity the sod who waited for her voice to grow shrill.

I got up and cleared the battlefield of mangled corpses (Lego soldiers missing heads or torsos) and the ruins of toppled constructions. (Why we got such satisfaction from destroying our

[65] House visits
[66] Trinkets
[67] Dinner time!

own projects, I'll never fathom.) I had an ice cream container lined with fabric and cotton where I stored my prized possessions; the rest went in a beaten old coffer along with the Legos.

I chose to distribute the placemats; we'd had the same rubber set since we were babies, with pictures of Bo-Peep and the Three Little Pigs marred by a million fingernail and fork impressions. I dealt them out around the table like a ninja and ran to torment my brothers with the knowledge of their unfinished chore (it had become something of a race to avoid doing the more arduous task of arranging the cutlery – my mother put emphasis on table manners and etiquette).

I found them bathed and pyjama-clad in their room, building a life-sized fort of their own. They were turning over mattresses and looked to be having fun, and I felt a little jealous that I'd been excluded. Bernard was rolled up in one of the mattresses like a Tootsie Roll, and when I informed him of his chore, he retorted he didn't have to due to his finger, though I hadn't seen him wince or complain in a few days. He still wore the splint but sometimes removed the sling, and I wondered if he wasn't milking the injury just a little.

My mother called for dinner again, and Constant and I unrolled our youngest brother from his padded prison to heed the implicit warning. When we got there, the table was set, and dinner was on the table (rice, meat, potatoes), and I was ready to complain that they'd shirked their duties, but something in the atmosphere made me hold my tongue.

We sat down to dinner, joined hands, and my father said a prayer: "*Here, dankie vir die ete, dink aan mense wat nie het nie, amen*."[68] It was customary for my father to run through these sentences like a muttered confession, hastening to punctuate it with "amen" (which was echoed around the table), and I'd never thought much about their meaning. At Christmas, he sometimes added a verse or two ("*Dankie vir ons saamwees*"[69]) or when people came over ("Thank you for the presence of X"), but this night, the simple words hung heavy in the air.

Though most people's helps ate in the kitchen, Johanna had frequently eaten at our table (although she seemed to prefer the convention, standing or perched over her plate in the washroom). She attended church with us too (she was the only maid who did), and until then, she'd been present for every Christmas. She was there for every Easter, New Year's and Guy

[68] Lord, thank you for this meal, think of people in need. Amen.
[69] Thank you for our togetherness.

Fawkes. I dare say she loved the last as much as me. We roved the beach-turned-warzone, dodging incoming rockets before settling on a spot on top of the Deep Blue. And if she managed to secure a box of premium firecrackers (compared to our paltry bangers and snappers), she deferred the honour of lighting them to me.

It hit me now like a rocket that she would no longer be there for these occasions, and I had a vision of a strangely featureless future. We'd achieved our aim, a family unit, tight-knit, unaccosted, and there could be little doubt we were safer. And though I could hardly deny a wave of relief, of vindication, victory even (and I'm sure that Bernard slept easier), the final effect around the table was one of solemn introspection, as if a pall had descended over our dinner. We were a living Calvinist portrait: downsized, drained of portent or colour.

I looked around the table (our faces dimly lit from the fixture) and already sensed a new and forced intimacy with the other members of my family – similar to when one was absent for a period (Constant at tennis camp) and how it brought on a shift in dynamics, in this case my uncontested status as leader and an undiluted focus from my parents (their diverted attention, for me a kind of reprieve). Whether these tectonic changes would work in my favour, only time would tell.

Something my father said that night stayed with me. It was offhand, something muttered in tones of exasperation to my mother, hardly intended to cause distress, probably in reference to Johanna's drinking. We were clearing the table, ushering away plates of uneaten vegetables, when he shot a knowing look at my mother: "If she carries on like that, she'll end up in a ditch."

Chapter 18: Greenways

We left not long after that day, moved into the new place: an island of grassy knolls and country streams, of fishponds and fairways encamped by electric fence, a hotel that for all its amenities felt unhomely, as if we had yet to unpack our things. Strange then that I still find myself here,

alone now and ill at ease.

For a while, life continued unhindered, I attended a new grade and made new friends. I found my voice again in my teenage years, and with a vengeance. My brothers followed suit in an English school of their choosing. We excelled, each more than the previous (honour rolls, A levels, tennis meets, piano solos). For years, another half-decade almost, this shadow chapter was expunged from the record. Also expunged was our heritage; we spoke a kind of mongrel Afrikaans at home, increasingly dominated by Anglicisms until our mother – deaf to begin with – could scarcely keep up with our conversations.

Then a series of seemingly unrelated misfortunes hit. Constant's tennis career was cut short due to a wrist injury. I half-suspected Johanna's arm twisting but she was long gone by then. I started flunking out of once-beloved subjects and got into catfights at school. It wasn't unusual to hear my name called over the intercom, being summoned to the principal's office. My parents were beside themselves with worry; an arsenal of teachers, church leaders, even a psychologist were called in to talk to me. They got through to me eventually – there was talk of me as a rocket ship and the school as my launching pad, but not before some damage had been done to my future prospects. (How the principal knew to use the metaphor, I'll never know, but it took the wind out of me.) I was on a rampage. I railed against everyone and everything (the tyranny of homework, of marching in straight lines, of song books and blazers on Fridays, of hormones and pimples and rich kids, before finally turning against my parents), but the real target was me. It was self-sabotage.

I turned out alright. I adjusted course, cut out friends, bad influences, spurned invitations to parties, didn't allow myself to get baited into fights. Turned the other cheek. I sequestered myself in my room to study for finals, made mind maps of internal organs and mnemonic devices for organic compounds and spotted exam questions like I was psychic. In the process I neglected whole bodies of knowledge: the heart, the brain, too complex to cram at the last minute. I passed my exams with flying colours, but I would no longer become a psychologist. (I was rejected by the admissions board based on the previous year's grades.) Nor would I go to the university residence my mother and my grandmother before her had attended.

As for Bernard, he became withdrawn. No one could have predicted it, but he turned out

to be the best-adjusted of us all: soft-spoken, polite, well-liked by everyone, so when he broke down, it came as a shock. At first, I thought he was sheltering himself from the constant fights and domestic upheavals (My mother: "Ek het ´n appeltjie te skil met jou!"[70]), the threats and counter-threats, and ineffectual punishments (grounding, doors taken off hinges), but he was fighting his own private battle. He landed in a clinic with a nervous condition exacerbated by the stress of the end-of-the-year exam. By that point, he'd pulled out nearly all of his hair: trichotillomania, a mild form of self-harm. We all had some version of hair pulling into adolescence (Constant kept his restricted to his sideburns). Still, no one made the connection. She was a non-topic, off limits.

It would be several more years until I thought of her.

Finding myself in the bathroom of a bungalow, vacationing at the beach, I experienced anger like never before. I had retreated after a family argument exploded (the boys men now, shoring up arguments against me). I found myself doubled over on the ground, taking stock of the spartan interior: floor stained grey with pools of perpetual damp and cold, the smooth cement inclines of the shower, the drain, and a fury welling up in me so great it could not be contained. So large and with nothing to fasten onto but concrete all round. It was inexpressible, and in an instant, I was afraid I'd kill my own mother outside the door (who'd had no part at all, at all of course).

To have faced opposition for so long you no longer know what you are but a puffed-out reply – realising it, and the sinking feeling, there's nothing left to defend but *these* dimensions, your inner life reduced to four walls. And it's bearable until you remember yourself – a familiar figment – and it's no longer bearable. The same cubicle, the same foetus that retracts and halves in spatial defeat. *So this is it, the inside of her hok*, I think.

For all the outward damage they did, these events might not have happened: a seam at the base, a straightness from the knuckle. As far as anyone knows it was an affectation related to tea drinking. Frankly, I'm astonished by her restraint. Restraint so ingrained in her daily toil (biting

[70] Afrikaans proverb, similar in meaning to "I have a bone to pick with you."

her tongue, her yes, ma'ams and thank yous), that even in the most delirious rage its expression was curbed to a thimble-full: a finger. How caged she must have truly been.

And while the damage was small (in proportion to her stores of justifiable scorn), I know where the real scars have formed. I see it in my brother's hesitant ways, his uncertain starts and finishes, his unfailing dismissal of himself. She dented his spirit that day. And she needn't have done much; we did the rest ourselves. The seeds were sown, self-hatred that skipped a generation. The flagellation took care of itself.

We all turned out a little different than we might have, not least of all her. We are pale imitations of our former selves, imposters. And like our shadow selves, our lives have taken on unforeseen contours, the peaks and valleys of a foreign topography (our paradise of cobblestone and beach views).

I never got far. I lead an adult life out of my childhood home. My parents putter around next door, the house divided into stand-alone units. Daily, I commute between office park, gym, convenience store and return to the home comforts of a gated community, one sanitised vacuum in exchange for the next. *Greenways*, some days I scarcely encounter the world.

My brothers took off fresh out of school, transplanted themselves as far away as they could. Whether to escape the past, the present, or for that matter our parents, they put an ocean between us. At one point our paths ran so far in opposite directions that we rebounded and briefly found ourselves under the same roof. Back in our parents' home, we reprised our former roles (the old rivalries) but something had gotten lost in translation. (A ghost-faced look, a foreign inflection, in many ways we were strangers now). One night after dinner, and several bottles of wine, the discussion turned to *her*. Our parents had gone to bed, and so were spared the inevitable indictment.

It started jovial enough (though I thought I caught Bernard massaging his finger). We recalled her most biting one liners, too many to count – the time she climbed the tree, the time she threw the brick. But then it grew serious. *Were we abused?* My brothers thought not. It came to squabbles over semantics but they thought the label didn't apply. It was a different time. And we were no worse off. Bernard scarcely remembered his ordeal.

I continued my wheedling to no effect. They looked back rather fondly on our time together. There were these and a few other revelations but in the end we could only agree in the broadest terms. For better or worse, her life impacted ours, as ours no doubt impacted hers. For better or worse, wherever she is.

If we were to meet her in the street today would we greet her differently? In my better moments I like to think I'd greet her with open arms, long-lost sisters after a bloody war, all forgiven, a chaste peck on the cheek. But perhaps it's more likely we'd walk on, lower our heads. My brothers would no doubt linger for small talk, reminisce about this or that, even Bernard was liable to uphold the pretence but I can't speak for them.

She's still there. She lives at the periphery of thoughts like she inhabited the compartment at the edge of the backyard: the edge of reason, the very edge of my sanity. She's a running commentary, an out-of-tune broadcast hell-bent on getting a reaction. I sense her there, boxed-in but making herself known in times of stress and harassment, physical almost that presence, embodied. She slips out when I'm pushed too far, a tirade of insults and intimidation, incomprehensible to my sober self. And if she lives on, it's through me in this way, though I've learned to shut her down. I hope my brother learns too.

I walk these manicured walkways now, a cobblestone path that ends at the coast. I cross its threshold, a faintly overlapping trace, and catalogue the washed-up stages of debris: sea grass, pumpkins, palates with rows of teeth, shark's eggs, mussels, items of human undress. Some days, I expect whole carcasses are beached. Pausing at the water, I feel it darkly call to me; soles lifted, I hover at the edge: I know if I wanted I could dive in.

I don't wonder about her fate anymore. I see her on a wire throne that scrapes the underfoot concrete with each movement. She is stoking the fire; charred newspaper floats on the rising smoke. Soon it will blot out the sun. It's the middle of December, the heat too much to stand, but we're all there. She uncovers a bottle of granadilla Schweppes. We each take a swig.

Epilogue

On stiflingly warm December days, days that leave me incapacitated and brooding, a dry breeze choking me with stirred dust and pollen, my mind invariably wanders back there, to her in the yard. During this season, anything can transport me back. The harsh yellow smells of pollen, of flowers and fruit so wild and ripe they verge on rankness, hint at impending decay. The whirring of frighteningly large insects, the stillness of big flat leaves, everything conducive to thoughtful moods, to hazy, stuporific memories trailing back too many years. The worst is when I snap back to the present, a stiffening branch stretched too far in the wrong direction, leaving me quivering from the backlash – one of these days I'll snap for real.

On days like these I become a girl again. In thinking of her I inevitably crawl back, tired and dirty to what feels like my birth place, only wanting to lie cradled in the branches of a tree, or hidden in some bush or crevice, an injured animal searching for a place to die. But the place has become scary and still, a museum after such a long absence. It's still there, the old *pastorie*, I never ventured too far away from it.

I returned to the backyard periodically. There were intervals over the years where one tenant had absconded and the next had yet to arrive and I could get in without rousing too much suspicion. (The plum trees still stand there, shedding their fruit in vain.) There had always been one lingering question, a game I played since I was very small (since before even my brothers were born). My parents had had a truckload of sand carted from the beach in an unsuccessful attempt at creating a sand pit, and as the years waxed the sand grew sparse until there was only a meagre smattering covering the dark soil underneath. I would crouch there, poking in the sand with a stick, testing consistencies, identifying debris, twigs, discarding the odd chicken bone. Sometimes I would use my stick to try and fish, tying to it a sprig of grass and using it to pick up items for later identification. To a casual observer it may have looked idle, but I was following a strict process of elimination, nevertheless afraid to go deep (for obvious reasons, this was prime burial ground after all).

I had seen a cartoon years before, before I could so much as speak (words like pebbles in my mouth, indiscriminate from the things they represent). In it I saw a mother turtle laying her eggs on the beach, depositing them in a hole, one by one, like ping pong balls (or pebbles) but more elastic, viscous. Slightly moist, they clung together filling out the sandy void. I wondered, then, if they were edible. She had been pursued by a wily fox but had shaken him off her trail by making another decoy hole. She filled this hole with prickly things: "*kastaiings*"[71], on which he would no doubt injure his limbs. I thought this was very clever. I had no idea what these thorny things were (akin in appearance to prickly pears) and for the longest time, indeed, I thought they were a kind of fruit. A fruit borne of the sea. I never thought to ask, instead, each time my mother took me to the beach I went on a quest, examining shrubs and trees before starting my digs (following a treasure trail of my own, looking for clues, prints, scattered debris, flattened shrubbery). As time passed, the eggs became secondary to the elusive *kastaiings*. And I would search, later I hardly knew for which, convinced I could outsmart the mother who had outsmarted the fox.

I don't know how it came to me that they were hidden in the yard. Perhaps it was the sand that convinced me, or perhaps I saw the yard as my private beach (hadn't I stored basins of sea water there once?). My expeditions to the beach were strictly limited to parental whim and supervision. There was also an outdoor shower where my parents made us wash off the worst of the sand before entering the house. It formed a sloping cavity beneath it that curved into a drain. It bordered the sandpit. If the drain was clogged the cavity would fill up with water and once it overflowed the water would run down concrete gutters next to the pit, forming at its outermost limit a little pool where water lapped the sallow earth. Perhaps this confused my infant mind (water, swimming costume, sand: it was all the same to a baby).

And so this game, this all-absorbing quest (but above all a question – what was this fruit-egg-urchin?) was transferred to the yard and continued into toddlerhood and childhood. I could happily spend hours turning up buckets of sand and pouring over their contents. I don't know when I stopped looking. Perhaps when my brothers were born and I no longer had these idle hours alone. I seem to remember them imitating me in my excavation work though they had

[71] Sea urchins.

no concept of my final goal – thought I was excavating for excavating's sake. Nevertheless, with the help of assistants I made fast work of this little section of earth. At one time there was a trench that ran parallel to the gutters, even curved slightly under its concrete limit (scraped out with stubby sticks). I had grown suspicious of the concrete since I had exhausted the open ground but gave up when its grain wore down my sticks to stumps. Eventually my time spent searching grew shorter, less structured, until I could scarcely remember the goal behind these digs and simply went through the motions as a force of habit. A decoy to begin with, my *kastaiings* disappeared from view.

I also started doing the reverse, burying things, stowing them for safekeeping: marbles, some money – I was convinced they would sprout a money tree. I drew an X to mark the spot and made my brothers witness so we could keep an eye on our investment.

I stumbled on them quite by chance when I had long stopped searching, having learned to ignore the nagging question every time I went to the beach: Isn't there something I should be doing? I came across a hollow in the sand with claw marks all around, as if something had been unearthed by a wild beast. And it had been. They were scattered everywhere in roughly concentric circles: my *kastaiings*. They were brown and crusted with sand (patently devoured with tooth marks and impressions) but I recognised them immediately, their strange geometric patterns. I was too late. The nest had been raided. But even too late, something had been confirmed. Some connection to the fantasy world. It was as I suspected. They were real.

As an adult, I solved the mystery of *kastaiings*: a kind of sea urchin endemic to the Western Cape, but not my fascination with digging for them in the backyard, nor digging in general (there'd been the time I tried to dig a hole to China). What was I after? Food, treasure or signs of subterfuge and entrapment? Of these motives, highest on my agenda, I have to assume, was some wayward search for mother. A surrogate nest, even one dried up and prickly as this, was a welcome vestige of maternity.

I returned to the backyard one last time, my quest for *kastaiings* replaced by yet another red herring, always deferred, at one more remove, the indefatigable search for womb, for rest, (death even) in the bowels of the earth. At some point the sandpit had been covered (or eroded for that matter, I'm unsure which came first) and a tree was planted – fertile ground after all, what

became her little yard.

I found the fig tree there, barely a bush, (symbol for what unmet salvation or reconciliation), bearing its unripe fruit and prayed it would grow, outgrow its concrete shackles. I tried the doors and gate and found them locked and that was good. I felt compelled to lie in the shrubbery but I knew if I did I would never get up. I knelt down instead, planting my heels in the dusty surface and placed my hand on the ground as if feeling for a heartbeat. And sure enough, something was beating. That old music: footfalls on cement. I turned around to face it now. Returned to me, in all her wrath: my surrogate-saviour-persecutor. *Pow-pow, pow-pow*… I thought I could discern a skipping beat, a limp, perhaps a wooden peg.

Instead, I'm confronted with the somewhat puzzled face of the *koster*. Or rather, his latest incarnation, an old man now the bearer of keys, everything else the same (dark-rimmed glasses, tie clipped in place, charcoal hair parted with the ridges of a wide-tooth comb). This one carried a cane (a lacquered relic, hooked, like a shepherd's crook). He stood leaning on it with both hands, slightly stooped, eyeing me with undisguised curiosity. *The crooked man*, a voice in the back of my head said. He didn't know me.

"Can I help you *Mevrou*?"

I recalled a time he caught me ringing the church bell and felt myself caught equally red-handed.

"Uhm no, I mean yes… a woman I know used to live here … I mean *I* used to live here…

"Which is it *Mevrou*?"

I felt myself reddening with childhood quickness.

"Well, it's both, but I haven't seen her for many years…"

"And what, you think you're going to find her down there digging in the dirt?"

Still half crouched on my hands and knees, I looked down and sure enough I'd started scratching away at the layers of hardened earth. I straightened slowly, a little alarmed at his accusatory tone. I thought I must have misheard.

"*Excuse me*?" I shielded my eyes against the glare (the sun low in the sky behind him), trying to make out his features more distinctly. His face had few lines for his age, a few horizontal gashes across the brow, a permanent look of concern. I tried a different tactic.

"I know this must look quite strange, I'm sorry …" I moved to extend a hand but before I could close the gap he interjected.

"I *know* who you are…" He emitted a nonsensical little chuckle. "We all wondered what happened after you took off so quickly! Terrible business with the little *rooikoppie*[72], your brother was it?"

I nodded slowly, trying to work out how much he knew, but after this it was easier, the old *dominee* connection still held its shine: "Ja, *Oom*, nee *Oom*",[73] answers to banal if slightly impertinent questions about my current welfare and I thought perhaps I'd gotten away with it. He seemed almost to have forgotten what he found me doing.

But then his tone changed again. He went back to his previous formality, almost like he was senile or struggling with dementia. There was something rote about it, like a long-honed sense of duty. His voice grew louder:

"You know, you're not the first person I found creeping around here. I found a woman here not a week ago. The one you're looking for, I believe. Yes, the very same. She was crouching, just like you there in the bushes. Why I was so surprised to find you, why I try to keep an eye out. We can't have strangers wandering in and out at all times of the day and night. There are the new tenants to think about, a *dominee* and his little kids, all boys I hear…"

He was lurching off on a tangent and while it took me a minute to find my voice (my mouth opening and closing like that of a fish), I had to know: "But *Oom*, what was she doing? In the bushes?"

"It's hard to say, it was dark you see. I mistook her for an animal at first. She was too big to be a common cat or dog so perhaps a lynx or fox but then you don't get too many wild animals outside story books anymore. Frankly, strange behaviour for grown women to be crawling

[72] redhead.
[73] Yes sir, no sir.

around in bushes…" He gave me a meaningful look.

I was nodding him along impatiently.

"If I had to guess, I'd say she was burying something. Nothing big. I poked around the next day but couldn't find a thing, not a leaf or a rock out of place, and no footprints or tracks on the earth's surface, like I'd witnessed a ghost." He got a far-off look in his eye, whereupon he shook his head vigorously. "What did you say your business was with this woman? Isn't it enough what she did to your brother?"

I thought that was my cue to leave.

I never found out what gifts she left stowed for me in the twice spackled earth. A part of me suspects it's a trap. Turtles lay their eggs at night but it's also when nocturnal scavengers come out to play. Sometimes I think she came digging for something she thinks *I* buried. Whatever it is, I know there is a string, however thin, that binds us still, be it the ground, what it contains (rocks, eggs, urchins), or what we lived through.

And like our past, our fates are tied together (ankle to ankle, wrist to wrist), a three-legged race to the finish. Until its grip is loosened this place will keep calling us. And whether it's the death grip of a spider or the fine embrace of a chrysalis, we'll return, sleepwalkers to our waking lives, stalking the fringes, its many crooks and pitfalls, finding rest only in its confines. *Hok*, yard, church grounds: we are destined to wander this labyrinth, prisoners of each other.

THE END

GLOSSARY

- *aan-aan* – the children's game tag
- *ACVV (Afrikaanse Christelike Vroueverenigingen)* – The Afrikaans Christian Women's Movement, a women's welfare organisation
- *bediendekamer* – servant's quarters
- *bergie* – slang term for a homeless person
- *boerboel* – South African mastiff, usually a guard dog
- *braai* – a traditional Afrikaans cooking style in which food is cooked over an open fire
- *bubbeltjie* – diminutive Anglicism of the English word bubble
- *die* – the
- *dominee* – a minister, typically of the Dutch Reformed Church
- *draadsitters* – fence sitters
- *hok* – cage or enclosure
- *hulle* – them
- *Jakkels en Wolf* – popular children's stories and cautionary tales about a fox and a wolf
- *kappie* – hood or bonnet
- *kastaiings* – sea urchins
- *kinderkrans* – religiously affiliated afterschool program, akin to Sunday School
- *kinders* – children
- *klipvissies* – small species of fish usually found in shallow rock pools
- *kop* – head
- *kopdoek* – headscarf
- *koster* – sexton, employee of the church charged with its maintenance
- *kroesies* – from *kroes*, which means very curly or disorderly. A derogatory term used to describe the hair of a black person
- *laaities* – young boys
- *meid* – derogatory term for a female, black or coloured housekeeper
- *Mevrou* – Miss
- *moedertaal* – mother tongue
- *moffie* – derogatory term for a homosexual male
- *njaba-njabas* – derogatory neologism to depict how black people sound to Afrikaners
- *ordentlik* – well-behaved, well-mannered
- *ouma* – grandma
- *pastorie* – a parsonage

- *plakkies* – flip-flops
- *Pudding wange* – pudding cheeks, or chubby cheeks
- *Rooi Kappie* – Little Red Riding Hood
- *Rooikoppie* – little redhead
- *Sarie Marais* – traditional Afrikaans Folk Song
- *seun* – son
- *sjambok* – a heavy leather whipping stick
- *skollie* – slang for a low level criminal or gangster
- *spyker bene* – insult for someone with thin or wiry legs
- *stoep* – veranda. See also *stoepie*, which is the diminutive of *stoep*, used to indicate a small stoep
- *suinig* – stingy
- *tannie* – familial aunt, or less formally, an Afrikaans term for any older woman who is usually also an Afrikaner
- *tierlantyntjies* – trinkets and decorative adornments
- *vieslik* – disgusting
- *vloerlappe* – floor rags
- *volk* – the people of the nation, here specifically referring to the Afrikaner