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The Child's Survival Guide

by

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January 2001

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*To My Uncle Peter,
For his Generosity and Support.*

University of Cape Town

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University of Cape Town

I imagine, therefore I belong and am free.

Lawrence Durrell

*it's small things
that make children laugh
it's a grain of curry in your eye
another drop in your sneeze
it's a bright flag whipping the wind*

*but mostly
it's the laughter in your laugh
that makes children laugh*

Sandile Dikeni

The Child's Survival Guide- Lesson 1: Getting Through Growing Up

Adults tell you that childhood is the easy bit. They talk at length about things such as Innocence and Freedom as opposed to the burdens of Responsibility, Paying the Bills and My Awful Bloody Job. But childhood is never that simple; it is a fraught and finely woven pattern of conflict and resolution; skirmishes which grown-ups have chosen to forget. One inherits 99% of one's traumas from one's experiences as a child; the Oedipus complex, the Elektra complex, the I Was The Fat Kid At School complex. In fact, if you make it to adulthood without any battle scars you are either a) in denial b) have the mental age of a three year old c) Beatrix Potter. Some form of guidance through this difficult period of one's life is essential, and The Child's Survival Guide offers advice on a variety of dilemmas facing the child of today. From bribing fairies to sibling rivalry, it is our aim to get you through growing up.

After all, you wouldn't want miss out on the joys of being an adult.

SOUTHSEA, ENGLAND, 1987

(1)

Susan Owen is seven when she sees her first fairy. It is autumn and the ivy in the alley has started to turn a thoughtful reddish brown, the colour of retreat. Susan sits on the small back step behind the door in the garden wall. She is trying not to let her feet slip off the step's edge because she knows that the solid surface of the alley floor is actually a magic pool leading to other worlds. If she touches it, she will be sucked in and pulled under, her arms thrown up above her head, her hair whipped about her face. There is a part of her that would like this very much, but mostly she is afraid and cold. So she keeps her knees tucked up carefully under her chin, watching the ground for the smallest ripple or slimy hand reaching to grab her ankles. A sharp gasp of wind lifts the ivy and rustles a nearby dustbin bag. Quite suddenly, there is a tiny person on her left knee, regarding her solemnly under tight brown curls.

"You can't hide out here forever, you know."

Before she can take a breath, the fairy has turned into a minute brown spider which scuttles down her leg and vanishes into the chilly dusk. Susan wipes her nose with the back of a mittened hand.

"I know," she says.

Although she was born there, she cannot remember Africa. Her mother beside her bed in a fleecy dressing gown talks of heat and dust rising off roads and running barefoot,

"We never wore shoes when I was a kid."

Susan worries about her as she drifts through the romance of that hot, southern past. She would not be surprised if her mother were to float serenely to the ceiling, dressing gown slipping off to reveal tawny skin clothed in grass and animal fur. She would pass through plaster and brick with a beatific smile and disappear forever. Perhaps one day, she will turn on the television and there will be her mother, stalking antelope with a spear in the whispering savannah.

“It had a smell too, after the rain. A kind of a green smell. And then the cicadas would start up again and it would begin to be evening. Evening was the best time. Sometimes there would be a storm and the rain would pour down in buckets. Really fiercely, as if it were angry with the day for being so hot. It pelted at everything and we used to run around the garden, getting soaking wet and tackling each other in the mud.”

This world exists as a gap for Susan, hungry and loud as a lion, stalking the edges of memory. She has fragments of sensual experience; a beach in the summer, the stretch of her costume and the wet cluster of shells in her hand. She tastes the salt in the waves that had knocked her over, and the soft smell of safety in the hair of a rescuing adult. She can touch it in the stories of her father.

“When you were three, we took you to a small zoo where they had a leopard. I’ll never forget the way it watched you and your brother. It saw nothing else but you, its eyes followed you everywhere. It wanted you for DINNER!!!” He leaps at his children with a roar. “I’m a starving leopard and I’m going to eat you ALL UP!!” At night she can still feel those eyes and their predator’s gaze upon her pink haunches. It is the gaze of Africa, claiming her skin.

But under the duvet the fairies are nibbling her toes. She kicks and giggles. "Stop it!" Their hands tickle her cheeks. Suusann, Suusann. She turns onto her stomach and shivers as their feet dance patterns along her back. When they have gone, she can hear drunks on their way home from a nearby pub. Its walls form the end of the alley where it opens onto the street, and you have to pass it to get in that way. In summer there is a dog chained to its flat roof. He is large and slathering, like a canine dragon. The Terror the children must pass before they can enter the world of the alley. One by one they run past screaming blue murder while the dog strains and roars above them. Once she had tripped as she ran, her palms scraping dirt. Slowly, she looked up from her knees to frothing jaws. As she watched, the barks became words sharpened on carnivore teeth and the furry jowls moved to speech. Go. Back. She had been transfixed for an entire minute until with a fierce WOOF, the dog let loose a jet of flames that whooshed past her ear. It really was a dragon in disguise. She leapt forward with a shriek, blundering into the gloom ahead of her as the barking echoed behind.

Outside her window, the human barks of the loudly intoxicated ring through the air,

"Play on Pompeeee, Pompy play on."

"Hitler has only got one ball, the other is in the Albert Hall. His mother, the silly bugger, chopped it off when he was small. Whatcha doing there, mate?"

"Takin' a piss for facks sake. What's it look like?"

"Bloody good idea, mate. B-l-o-o-d-y good idea."

Susan puts her pillow over her head and hums a little tune. She tries hard not to listen because if she does, curiosity is going to get the better of her. She

has been warned about NOTSTARINGATTHE DRUNK PEOPLE. It ranks right up there with DON'THITYOURBROTHER and LEAVEYOURNOSEALONE. If she looks, a bad thing will happen to her. Like the elephant's child in the Kipling stories her mother reads to them at bedtime, a crocodile will spring out of nowhere and grab her by the nose. Then it will pull and pull and she will be left with an enormous dangling trunk. She'd have to carry it around in her arms so that it wouldn't drag on the ground and get dirty. She imagines it coiled next to her desk at school like a huge python, all pinky-grey and wrinkled. But her toes are itching to tip toe over to the window sill.

"Hitler has only got one baaaall..."

Quickly and quietly, she throws off the duvet and creeps to the window. Pulls the curtain back the tiniest bit. There are two men weeing on the pavement outside their house. She knows this is what they're doing, because out of the embrace of their hands arcs of yellow liquid are staining the concrete. She has seen her brother and father do this, although only once in public. They had gone on a picnic with friends and before the drive home, all the boys and men had stood in a long line with their backs to the women and peed in the bushes. She had been incensed with envy. "I want to wee like that Mummy. Why can't I wee like that?" And she still couldn't, no matter how hard she tried. She can wee longer than anyone else she knows though. She counts as she sits on the toilet. Sometimes she can get up to twenty. "Onetwothreefourfivesix...Daddy, I can wee for twenty counts." She tells her father as he shaves in front of the mirror.

"Mmmmm? What? That's nice Susie."

Suddenly one of the men looks up,

“Ooos that little girl? Wot you lookin’ at?” Her heart gives a thump. She runs back to bed and flings the covers over her head, waiting for a crocodile attack. But none comes. There is only the retreating laughter of the men as they stagger off down the road. “Naughtee little girls get a smack on the bum!”

The next morning the flowers by the front railing wilt under the reek of urine.

“Bloody bastard poms,” says her father, shaking his head.

Poms. What are they? Susan takes to scrutinising people for any tell tale characteristics. Is it hair colour? A slope in someone’s walk? The poms can’t play cricket, they don’t bath often enough. They wee on pavements. As she walks back from school with her brother she keeps a careful eye out for pom activity, but she isn’t sure what to look for. She says to Samuel, “If you’re not careful, you’re going to turn into a pom!”

It is the kind of afternoon that turns noses pink and drippy, the sky is a heavy grey and the wind slinks in between layers of clothing. The twins are puddle jumping, school shoes smacking against the ground, mouths liquorice stuffed.

“A what?”

“A pom.” Jump. “It’s a disease.” She lands with a thump and pauses for thought. Remembers a television programme they watched the night before and is suddenly inspired. “It’s a disease like AIDS and it’s going to make you sick and then you’re going to die.”

Sam freezes in mid-hop, jaw dropping open to reveal a sweet sticky black

tongue. He has a disease phobia; is obsessed with germs and the tiny terrors they can inflict upon him.

"AIDS?" he whispers, pale under his blonde hair.

"Yup," says his sister with a cheerful skip. She turns and points at him,

"That freckle on the end of your nose? That's the first sign of Pom Disease."

He touches his face with a quivering hand as it begins to rain, an empty crisp packet twirling next to his still feet.

"Oh."

They run the rest of the way home, chased by a cold wind and the gathering dark. Their house is number seven in a street of gracious Georgian holiday homes, rare survivors of the bombs which destroyed much of the city in the Second World War. They streak past the hairdressers, the flower shop, the red door of the Davis' house, until they have reached their own blue one.

Inside it is warm and comfortable and Susan yawns sleepily as her mother helps her to take off her shoes and puts their wet socks in front of the heater.

"Would you like some tea, twins?" She kisses them on their damp foreheads.

"Sam? What's the matter?"

He gives a ~~small~~ sob, "Susan says I'm a pom and it's a disease and I'm going to get sick and die because I have a freckle on the end of my nose."

There is a brief silence before their mother does something quite extraordinary. She laughs. She laughs so much she has to sit down. Her two children stare at her, bewildered. Then Samuel bursts into tears.

"So I'm not a Pom, Mummy?"

"A pom is an English person, sweetheart. You are Zimbabwean."

The twins frown at each other. Zimbawhat? They are sitting in the bath, the warm water lapping at their thighs and steaming up their mother's glasses. Susan likes the bath, but she isn't so sure about sharing it with Sam. Sometimes he does poos that are so sneaky she shares the bath with them for a good five minutes before she realises what has happened. Her favourite bit is when Dad dries her off with a fluffy towel, making aeroplane noises. He rubs the sides of her head between the cloth so that her hair stands up in eccentric spikes. Mummy complains when he does this. She says it makes the hair impossible to comb. It is one of the many things they disagree on. But we ARE English, Mummy. This kind of talk makes her cross. "We are English and we like it."

"Don't you remember your nanny, Rosalind? She used to play football with you in the garden. We had a big garden, with a swimming pool. Don't you remember?" They shake their heads and she sighs,

"I suppose you are English aren't you." It is more statement than question. She gets up from her knees and pushes her glasses further up her nose.

"I'm going to get your pyjamas. Behave yourselves."

After she has gone, Sam splashes Susan with a flick of his hand.

"See, I'm not sick. You're a pom."

"Am not!"

He has a crafty look on his face. Immediately, her suspicions are aroused.

"What are you doing?" she says, alarmed. Tiny bubbles are floating up from his end of the bath. There is a familiar stink in the air. She leaps up with a shout, "You're doing a poo!" and runs naked out of the bathroom.

Susan's parents always fought behind doors, but their fierce whispers still

snaked under her door to writhe on her pillow. From her room she can hear them, lying wet and naked on her bed. She peers down at the pink rise and fall of her body. Her flat chest with its brown nipples, each crinkle an eyelid closed to the world. The small bulge of her stomach still flushed from the heat of the bath, the damp between her legs and the neat regiment of her toes pointing to the ceiling. She is getting chilly, but wills herself to stay immobile, lets the sensation slip along her skin and brush her nerve endings. Last year the winter had been cold enough for snow. She had gone with her mother to visit a female friend with a daughter her own age, and she shared another bath in that house, two little girls in an immense tub. They had run outside nude into the snow soft garden and rolled around in its white clasp, then sprinted back to the bathroom and jumped into the water. She can remember the pain as her freezing limbs connected with steaming liquid, needles screaming along her flesh, and concentrates on the memory to muffle the voices,

"Don't tell me what I can and cannot do, Andrew..."

"Oh for Christsakes, you're always so melodramatic!"

"And you never listen, you just try to shout me down. Why won't you listen?"

Susan puts her nightie on and creeps downstairs. Samuel is still sitting in the bath. He looks up at her,

"Where's Mummy?"

"I don't know, stupid. You stupid pom."

Susan crouches behind a stack of unwanted furniture in the spare room and sobs silently until her body shakes. No one can hear her in this forgotten

corner of the house, as the wind rises and wails outside. When her parents first bought it, a bedroom had existed where now there are only piles of junk, old clothes, lamp shades, dusty photo albums, boxes overflowing with the detritus of living. There were lodgers once on the top floor, a young couple who burnt incense and dressed in eclectic, bright fashions. The girl had long light brown hair which swung across her face to hide a shy smile, her boyfriend a drooping black moustache and deep dark eyes. She recalls them only blurrily, because they left after a few months. Mary became pregnant and as her stomach swelled, so had their need to find their own home. The room belongs to no body now, except perhaps Susan who comes in to hide or to rummage through discarded memories. Once, at the very bottom of a large trunk and so squashed its soft head was flattened, she found a blue teddy bear. It was ragged and one-eyed, staring at her with mournful myopia. She put it to one side and then forgot about it when she heard her mother call her for dinner. When she remembered to look again the next day, the teddy was gone. She accepted this disappearance unquestioningly. Perhaps it decided to go for a walk. She had a clan of cuddly toys already and was prepared to allow the blue bear its freedom. She is holding one of them now, a velvety pony tucked up under her chin. As she cries and her body rocks, she blows great bubbles of saliva out of her mouth that pop on her chin. They drip onto the floor, making round stains of unhappiness. The wind grows louder and angrier and Susan gets up, clambers over the furniture and hurries back to her bedroom, where she falls into a fitful sleep.

That night a hurricane tears through Southern England. It destroys homes and electricity lines, splits the roots of seven oaks that have stood on a

village common for hundreds of years. The twins' dreams are permeated by the groans of the wind as it presses up against the house in a fierce embrace. They turn restlessly when a tree collapses across the street and windows explode. They don't hear their parents tip-toe through the passages to check on their small sleeping forms. When they wake it is to a shattered world. Their street is almost unrecognisable. Cars have been flipped like beetles onto their backs, wheels offering silent protest against such indignity. There is glass and litter everywhere and fallen telephone poles block the road. Sam wanders into Susan's room in his pyjamas and they gape silently at the destruction outside her window. It is quiet and empty; the wind has exhausted itself.

"Twins?" Their mother puts a warm hand on each back.

"What happened, Mummy?"

"There was a storm, a very big one. Put your uniforms on and come down for breakfast."

"Do you think there won't be school today, Mummy?"

She smiles at the hope in the childish voice. "Won't be school, Sam. You mean *won't* be." The view from her daughter's window is dramatic, the street resembles a war zone. "There might not, but I want you get dressed anyway. They gaze at her sorrowfully but she is firm. "Come on, twins. Don't make me wait for you."

Downstairs, their father has turned the radio on. The television refuses to work and they have no electricity.

"Hello, twins. Would you like some brekkers?" He pours them each a bowl of milky cereal and fiddles with the radio dial. "Apparently there was a

hurricane last night. Do you know what a hurricane is?"

Susan nods and quotes her mother, "A very big storm."

"That's right." The radio emits a grumpy crackle and he reaches for the volume control. The only words that make any sense to her are the ones she has been waiting for, *People advised to stay indoors...schools closed down...* and she clamps onto them like a sinner offered unexpected forgiveness.

"No school, Daddy! No school!" The twins link arms and dance across the dining room. No school! A whole day to do what they want with. Across the south of England, the voices of children rise in delight at this sudden freedom, if only there could be hurricanes *every day*, whilst their elders sigh and count the cost to lives and property.

Imogen turns to her husband, "And to think the forecaster last night said there would only be strong winds."

"That's the Poms for you," says Dad. "Don't know a thing about the weather."

(2)

The world has many magic places, but they are not for finding. Over the New Year, the whole family takes the train up to Newcastle to visit her father's brother and his wife. They have a new baby. Before she leaves, Susan has to say goodbye to Elvis Presley. He gazes sweetly up at her from the record cover with his perfect white smile. This is one of the things she loves about him. She still has gummy gaps waiting to be filled with adult teeth. And he has the most wonderful hair, black and sleek above his young

face. It is hair that Demands Adoration. They have been engaged for a month now, so she knows that he will worry about her going away. She has raided her mother's meagre make-up supply and smeared on some lipstick. "G'bye. I'll be back soon." She kisses him on his cheeks and once on his shiny mouth, although he is already stained with pink lip imprints from previous passionate encounters. She puts him reluctantly back with the rest of her father's records. "I won't forget you, Elvis."

Susan loves the train, the secret glimpses into backyards, fields, sheep, cows, hedges. Bliss. She sits with her nose pressed up against the window, absorbing. What are the people like in the houses that they pass? What are their names? Are they happy? Some of the houses are close enough to the railway line for her to see into the rooms of their inhabitants; a Superman poster on a white wall, stuffed toys lined up against a window, a wooden aeroplane hanging from a ceiling. She feels a quiet connection with these children and sends them silent kisses through the glass, "For you and you and you."

Next to her, Dad shifts in his seat and stifles a yawn. She turns and buries her head into his side, inhaling the woolly red of his jumper. Sam is already asleep in Mum's lap, his delicate eyelids crisscrossed with fragile purple and blue veins. As she looks at him, she has the irrepressible urge to kick him. They had a fight that morning, and she is developing a bruise from where he pinched her. The train before this one was smaller and fuller so that the carriages were packed with passengers. They were squashed next to each other and he pinched and pinched, knowing she would be too embarrassed

by the presence of other people to retaliate. When they got off to change at King's Cross she walloped him on the back of his head with her teddy bear. "Arrrgh! Muuum, she hit me!"

"Susan."

"But he..."

"No buts. Leave Sam alone." The tone was warning. She gave up. Parents don't see the ~~tiny~~ battles between children. They have forgotten the secret manoeuvres of sibling warfare. Still, she is good at getting her revenge when least expected. She can bide her time.

While she is plotting, Dad gently levers her from his side and stands up. "I'm going for coffee. Anyone want anything?" She turns to watch him walking down the aisle. He is getting a bald patch, the skin of his scalp shining pinkly. She fights the urge to run after him and take hold of his hand, because from the back he looks so lonely.

Instead she prods her mother with an extended foot. "Mummy, tell me more about the Wall." Imogen isn't listening, she is staring out of the window at the grey sky. Susan recognises the expression on her face with alarm. She has gone off to Africa. "Mum! The WALL!" This time the kick has the desired effect. "Ouch, Susan! Stop it!" She frowns and sighs, "What is it?" "Tell me about King Arthur." Another frown. "Please?"

Her mother pulls the guidebook out of the rucksack, hair falling into her face, "Built by the Roman Emperor Hadrian, between 121-127 AD, and stretching from the Tyne to the Solway, the wall served to protect England against attacks from the North by the ferocious Picts. According to legend,

King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table recline in an enchanted slumber in a cave hidden somewhere along its length. Near the sleeping king is a golden horn, which when blown in England's hour of direst need, will rouse him and his company to ride to her rescue." She looks up and slides her glasses back along her nose with an index finger.

"There you are, twins."

"What is dire, Mummy?" Sam has woken up, face still flushed with dreaming. "Is it like a dire-mond?"

Susan bites her lip with impatience. StupidSam. Who cares about dire-monds. She shivers. *Arthur*. The word sings with possibility. She whispers it under her breath and the fairies do somersaults next to her ear, "Magic, Susie. Magic!" She can see herself in a high-arched cave deep under the ground. In front of her on a silver throne, surrounded by Merlin and his knights, sleeps King Arthur. He is Beautiful. More beautiful than the Jesus in her Sunday school books. More beautiful even than Elvis Presley. There is absolute stillness except for the rise and fall of her own small chest. Her Wellingtons make loud squelching sounds on the stone floor, so she takes them off and pads over to him in her socks. She puts her hands on his knees and studies him carefully. Then she takes a deep breath and tweaks his nose. He doesn't budge. She swallows a gulp of air and burps in his face. Nothing. Suddenly there is movement behind her and she stumbles backwards with a shriek. But it's just the fairies. They pull her hair and pinch her bottom. "The horn, Susie. Blow the horn and save England." She takes a step forward. Hesitates. "I don't know..." The pinches grow harder. "Alright, alright. Keep your knickers on." The horn is on a shelf that juts out of the cave wall. It is smooth and cold under her fingertips. Heavy. To ^{her} surprise, she picks it up

with ease and realises it has been waiting for her all these centuries. Especially for her. Just like Excalibur waited for King Arthur. Susan puts it to her lips and blows. Noise fills the cave. It rumbles of the walls and becomes a howl. She begins to shake all over and the horn drops from her hands with a clang. The King opens one piercing blue eye. "Sausage," he says, "are you cold? You're trembling."

Imogen peers at her daughter with concern. "Susie Sausage?" The Blower of the Golden Horn sits up with indignation. "I'm not a sausage. I'm going to find King Arthur and be The Saviour of England."

"Well that's a very nice thought, darling. But you're an African."

Susan loses her temper. She is tired of being of being told who she is. She gets up and stamps her foot, "I am not an African!" People look at her from newspapers and colouring books. They whisper. She flushes red, turns and pelts down the aisle past their stares. Behind her Imogen calls, "Susan!" But she doesn't stop.

She runs with her head down until she has reached the kiosk at the end of the train. Slams straight into the chest of her father who swears and drops his coffee.

"Jesus Christ! He takes her by the arm and gives her a shake, "What are you doing, you silly girl?"

Her answer emerges in sobs,

"I...I'm not an A... African and I wanted to blow the golden horn and save you."

He is confused. "You what?"

She grabs his sleeve and wails, "Dadeeee."

Her father sighs and takes out a tissue. He wipes her nose. "Don't cry. Come on, I need some more coffee and we'll get you a packet of crisps."

She puts her hand in his and they walk back to the kiosk. The man behind the counter is short and round and jolly, with fat cheeks. He looks like an overgrown gnome. " 'Ad an accident, did we?"

"I'll have a black coffee, no sugar, and a packet of...Susie?"

"Hmmm?" She is staring surreptitiously at the ears of the counter man. They are pointed. "Cheese 'an onion, please." While Andrew dabs at the stain on his jersey with some paper towels, she watches his coffee being made. She leans over the counter and sees that the man has little feet encased by red boots. Suspiciouser and Suspiciouser. He waddles back to them, padded bottom swaying comfortably, "Here you are then. That'll be two pound fifty, please." Andrew pays and sits down near the window. Susan stays behind. She whispers, "I know you're really a gnome!" The man laughs loudly. His multiple chins wobble. He bends his head close to hers, "Is that so? Well I think you should watch how you run, little lass. People who rush around without looking often miss what they're looking for."

Then he reaches out a plump forefinger and taps her on the nose. She gasps and turns round to see if Dad has noticed. He hasn't.

"Dad!"

"Leave the nice man alone, darling. Come and sit down."

She opens her mouth to say something and then thinks better of it. Gives the gnome-man her most Penetrating Stare and joins her father on the bolted yellow stools. When she checks again, he has gone.

"Dad..."

"Yes?"

"Nevermind."

She opens her crisps and sniffs and munches. She presses her nose to the window and her breath mists up the cold glass. "Are we almost there?"

"Almost."

The tiredness in his voice makes her look at him. He seems older under the artificial light. His skin sags slightly and there is stubble along his jaw. For the first time she notices that his eyes are the exact bright blue of King Arthur's.

The Child's Survival Guide- Lesson 2: How to Summon a Fairy.

Fairies are vain and self-absorbed. They are also fickle creatures who are liable to turn nasty at the slightest provocation. The first law of fairy-summoning is thus CAUTION. Do not call for a fairy unless it is absolutely necessary. You must have a satisfying explanation for hauling them from the otherworld or you may find yourself living in a small green pond catching flies with your tongue. The second law is FLATTERY. Fairies adore this. They love music and dancing almost as much as they do themselves. Invent a little song emphasising their beauty, their cleverness, and so and so forth, skipping in a circle as you sing. You may add a few hops for effect. WARNING: if you are unable to carry a tune do not attempt summoning of any kind. There is nothing quite so insulting to a fairy as a child who sings their praises badly. The third law is consequently DISCRETION. Know your limitations. If you can't do it properly, don't do it at all. Otherwise you may find yourself buzzing feebly, stuck to the tongue of the frog who lives in the small green pond.

Nine times out of ten, the fairies will seek you out. Often they give no hint of their arrival. They are just there. And they always want something.

Three days later Susan is strapped in the back of her uncle's car with the new baby. She kicks her feet impatiently against the seat. She tugs her jumper. Next to her the baby wriggles. It burps. It makes strange and revolting smells. She gives it a withering glare. "You're disgusting."

"No, I'm not!" Sam's voice is indignant.

"I didn't mean you, dummy."

"Oh." His blonde hair sticks up at right angles from his head, face fragile under it's thatch.

"Where are we going today?"

"Don't you know *anything*?" She reaches over the baby and pokes him in the side. "We're going to see the Wall and I'm going to find King Arthur and be the Saviour of England."

"No you're not. I am."

She is horrified. "No you're not! I am!" They begin to fight, batting at each other with their hands whilst the baby gargles between them.

"TWINS!" Their mother's voice is ferocious and they jump guiltily, Susan still clutching her brother's shirt.

"She started it!"

"It doesn't matter! You're going to hurt the baby!"

A long arm reaches in and hauls Sam out.

"You can come in the other car with me and Aunty Clare." A grown-up head lowers itself next to Susan's window. It gives her a Look. "You. Behave." She feels not unlike a tourist on safari who is given the Hairy Eyeball by a

disapproving elephant. She presses herself against the seat and tries not to make any sudden movements.

Her uncle climbs into the driver's seat and starts the car. He has a bristly moustache like an army Sergeant- Major. It scratches whenever he kisses her on the cheek. Dad gets in and slams the door. "Tally-ho!" he says, and they chortle in a brotherly way. She has seen photographs of both her parents when they were young, but it is impossible for her to connect the children with the adults. She finds it difficult to picture them as siblings; squabbling, tumbling together on the ground. Playing cops and robbers. The photographs are always black and white so she thinks of the 50's and 60's as decades suspended in shades of grey. Strong feet with hardened soles gripping rocks next to a river. Acacia trees and stubbly grass. Tattered pairs of shorts. Eyes squinting against the African sun. Whilst her uncle and father chat, she stares at the back of their heads and wills them to be nine years old again. It doesn't work.

The day is cold and windy, the sky low-slung. They stop outside a church in Hexham, a small town some miles away from the Wall itself. Susan clambers out and runs after her mother who has gone inside, reading her guidebook closely. "There's supposed to be a trapdoor here somewhere, leading down to a crypt."

"A what, Mummy?" She doesn't like the word. She doesn't like the church much either. It is clammy and damp. An ancient sadness whispers through the empty pews.

"Mummy..."

"Good afternooon, Madam." The man appears from nowhere. He is tall and

almost transparent in his paleness, rubbing his long fingers together.

"Good afternooon. May I be of assistance?" Susan is sure the tongue flicking out to wet his lips is forked like a snake's. She pulls urgently at her mother's arm.

"Mummy..."

"Shhh, darling." She turns to address the man, "I'm looking for a crypt." She waves her battered guidebook. "It's mentioned in here."

"Ahhh," he looks mildly surprised. "We don't get many visitors who know about it. We prefer to keep its existence a local secret. Wouldn't do to have tourists traipssing in and out. It's a very...delicate site."

"I'd really appreciate it if you would allow me to go down."

The tongue flickers again and then he bares his teeth in an attempted smile.

"Very well. You're standing on it."

They look down. Beneath their feet is a faded Persian carpet and they shuffle sheepishly off it.

"Allow me." He bends stiffly at the waist and knees and Susan is surprised when he doesn't creak. Two long arms detach themselves from his side and the skinny fingers extend, rolling the carpet back to reveal a trapdoor set in the stone. He grasps a metal ring embedded in the door and lifts it up with a grunt. There are stone steps leading down into blackness and a dank smell brushes Susan's nostrils.

"Follow me, pleasse."

"Mummy!"

"What is it, Susan?" She is getting impatient.

"I...nothing."

She watches her mother disappear by segments. Feet, legs, torso, head. She stands on the edge of the square and peers downwards.

"Mummy?"

"Come and look, darling. It's very exciting."

She shudders. Down there? You must be joking. The church is silent. It broods. Sam clatters inside, interrupting the quiet. "Where's Mummy?" She points. "Down there." Then adds, "With a strange man." His eyes follow her finger and widen. "A strange man? But it's so dark. Wotn't she be Scared?"

"You mean *won't*." She bites her lip. "Maybe we should rescue her."

Without waiting for him to respond, she walks down the steps and into the crypt. It is dim and oppressive, brightened only by the feeble light cast through the trap door. A tingle along her skin makes her teeth chatter. Imogen is standing next to one of the walls, peering earnestly through her spectacles. "Look, Susie-Sausage. These blocks were shipped down river from an ancient Roman site. Here are the Latin inscriptions. They were tombstones. Centuries and centuries old. Look."

Out of the gloom, the white form of the Strange Man appears next to her and she jumps in alarm. Moves closer to her mother. His thin fingers caress the stones. "Each tombstone bears the same inscription. *To the Deified souls of the Dead*. They worshipped the usual panoply gods, of course. Jupiter, Apollo, Mars. Mithrasss."

"Mithras wasn't adopted from the Greeks, was he?" Imogen has whipped out her notebook and is scribbling energetically.

"No. He was Persian, the god of light and truth. Hunter of wild animals. Bulls were his sacred animal, and his ssacrifice. The Christians turned him

into the Warrior Archangel Michael, but in fact his birthday was the 25th of December. Until it was stolen from him by Jessus.” He pauses, “Then there was the ordeal.”

Her mother looks up. “Ordeal?”

Susan is beginning to feel claustrophobic. Her throat is closing up. She puts her hand to the stones and feels the rough chill prickle up her arm. She cannot imagine the dead hands that engraved them. The bodies that lay under them. She is finding it hard to breathe, the stone under her palm seems to shift and expand.

“Yesss. It was an officer cult, you see, and a man had prove his worth. Be initiated. The ordeals tested courage and they were brutal. Even fatal.” He leans closer. His smell shares the dankness of the crypt. “Sssometimes, they were buried aaalive.”

Susan’s mouth stretches into a scream that rings through the darkness. She hurtles up the steps and out of the church.

“Susan! Susan, what is it? What’s wrong?”

Her mother wraps a warm pair of arms around her.

“Ghosts, Mummy. There were ghosts.”

“Dear sausage. There’s no such thing as a ghost.”

Susan shivers. She knows better, but doesn’t argue. Sam gives her an empathetic punch. He sleeps with a stick in his bed to ward off nightly monsters and spirits. Blankets tucked around his neck as a protection against vampire bites. From the adults she gets pats on the head. They exchange weary glances. Child + overactive imagination = hard work.

Uncle Simon strokes his moustache. “I suppose even the long dead have their ways of asserting themselves.” He glances at his watch. “We’d better

get going. It'll get dark early."

As they drive away, she turns and looks back at the church. There is a thin figure standing in the doorway. It waves at her.

The Child's Survival Guide - Lesson 3: How to Handle a Ghost

This is a difficult one. Ghosts are unpredictable, and they are always frightening. There is nothing reassuring about finding an apparition at the end of your bed. Our advice is to behave as you would if you had done something naughty. Shut your eyes and hope that it will all go away. If this doesn't work, apologise. Ghosts are usually made to wander the earth because they did something UNFORGIVABLE whilst they were alive. They might be pacified if they think that you are also suffering from a guilty conscience.

The Wall stretches into the horizon. She hadn't realised it would be so long and is having doubts. But the fairies are unrelenting. They titter in her ears and pull her hair so that it whips about her face with the wind. They bite her cheeks. Sam has stayed in the car with Aunty Clare who is nursing the baby. The other adults are clustered near the stone remnants of a fort which has been turned into a tourist centre. They stamp their feet and blow onto their hands, little puffs of breath hanging before their faces. She has wandered off and they have not yet noticed, her mother's head still buried in the guidebook. She is waving vaguely to her left, "There ought to be an altar around here somewhere..." The ground squishes under Susan's Wellingtons. Squelch-slurp-squelch. With slow steps she walks alongside the Wall. It is

higher than she expected, standing some distance above her head. Grey and stony like the crypt she fled. She runs her fingers along the stones as she walks and they remain solid and unmoving. She sneezes and wipes her nose on her sleeve. It has started to drizzle. "There *are* ghosts, y'know," she says to the fairies. "We believe you, Susie." They fly under chin and she feels the gentle tickle of their wings. She continues to walk, face scrunched against the rain. She turns around but the fort and her parents have vanished behind a hill. The Wall leads into a wood and she enters it timorously, the drip drip of the rain pattering through the foliage. Apart from this sound it is very quiet. The trees are densely clustered and she feels watched. "How much further?" she asks the fairies. There is no reply, just the empty whoop of the wind. "Hello? Fairies?" Her foot catches upon a rock and she trips, hitting her head on the ground. The world is momentarily darkened. A streak of pain slashing along her forehead jolts her to her senses and she prods it gingerly. The skin is tender and her hand comes away with a thin stripe of blood. She manages to crawl next to the wall and begins to cry softly. Her palms are scraped and bleeding. Her nose runs. She is cold and wet. If she dies here, she will never marry Elvis. He will be left all alone, thinking that she has abandoned him. She will never know what it feels like to turn ten and to have reached double digits. She will certainly never find King Arthur. A swelling of rage and hopelessness rises in her chest. She lifts her head and howls, "Dadeeeee! Mumeeee!"

"You shouldn't wail. It is unbecoming in a maiden."

Susan is startled. There is someone sitting next to her where before there had been nobody. A man. He frowns at her sternly, "Your father would be ashamed to hear such cowardly whimpering."

She is too astonished to be afraid. "Excuse me?"

He stands in one fluid motion, white cloak swishing.

"Follow me." Despite the fact that he is short and slightly built, there is something commanding about him and she scrambles up clumsily. He walks briskly and she has to run to keep up, although the weight of her Wellingtons makes this difficult. He doesn't appear to feel cold because his feet are clad only in leather sandals. He isn't even wearing socks. She follows him out of the wood, panting heavily, legs turning to jelly. There is an ache in her head that makes her feel sick, but at least the rain has stopped.

"I...can we...are we nearly there yet?"

"This will do." They have reached a part of the wall which is fairly low and partly collapsed, the stones flung about as if by some giant infant. He climbs easily up to their tumbled summit and gestures for her to do the same. She obeys reluctantly, slipping and sliding after him.

"Look about you."

The view is dramatic, framed all round by purple tinged hills. Winter crocuses and thistles hide in the long grass that sweeps down the steep slope below them. To the right, in the distance and lit by rays of sunlight penetrating the clouds, is a large stony crag. To the left, the fort is barely visible. Cutting through it all is the wall, marching over the landscape as far as she can see. She feels very insignificant among such magnificence, and huddles down into her raincoat.

"Do you know who built this wall?"

She shakes her head.

"The Emperor Hadrian. The territory itself was conquered by Agricola under Domitian. I was born the week after he returned triumphant to Rome. Of

course then they no longer awarded Generals the Triumph, it was reserved for the Emperor alone. But it must have been a spectacle in the days of the Republic. The streets strewn with flowers, altars and statues decorated. Imagine,” he spreads his hands out before him, “the night before, the General and his troops camp overnight on the Campus Martius. They are fevered with excitement but prepare themselves assiduously, for to enter Rome through the Porta Triumphalis is the greatest honour a soldier will ever know. The procession is led by the magistrates, but there are also trumpeters and priests, leading oxen for the sacrifice. The captives walking in chains, destined also for sacrifice. Musicians and dancers and then,” he leans towards her, “can you see him? The General himself in a four-horsed chariot and robed in purple, laurel crown on his head.”

Susan listens in awe, she has no idea what he is talking about, but his face is on fire with enthusiasm and his dark eyes shine. She cannot help but be carried away with him, into the grand history he is re-creating.

“After the General followed his soldiers, singing praises in his honour, their javelins wreathed in laurel. All this I know from the tales of my grandfather, who learned them from his father, who was alive during the reign of the great Augustus. I never did see it for myself. But Rome...Rome I remember well.” He runs his hand along the shadowy stubble of his jaw. “I do not believe that I will ever see her again.”

She puts her hand up as if in school because she is sure that permission must be granted before she can speak.

He nods at her, “Yes?”

“Why won’t you?”

“Because,” he sighs, “it is my duty to serve her here at the limits of the

Empire. To guard against the blue-painted and accursed Picts who invade from the north. They are godless barbarians who eat the flesh of their dead.” He turns and her eyes follow his pointing finger. The mist slithering down from the hills towards them becomes ominous. She can almost see shapes moving through the grey; long-haired and running close to the ground, eyes glinting like cats. Fear leaps through her and she tries to stand up, stumbling on the wet rocks. “Shhh,” he puts a hand on her shoulder, “do not be afraid. They cannot harm you while I am here. I am Julius Honoratus, Commander of the Second Legion and as long as I stand they shall never pass!” The mist creeps back and the air brightens. “As long as I stand...” he is silent. Susan takes a deep breath and exhales slowly.

“Can’t you ever go home?”

“No. I will never see my house or wife again. Never see my sons grown. Place offerings at the altar of my ancestor, the *Lar familiaris*. Feel the warmth from the sacred fire of the Vesta that must always be kept alight. Never.”

There is quiet. She dare not speak and he has turned away, his face hidden from her. The wind whispers around them, lifting his cloak so that the red tunic underneath is briefly revealed. She feels an immense emptiness echo through the hills. It is as if they are the only two people left on the earth.

“Suuusan! Suuusie!”

“Daddy, I’m over here!”

“Are you all right? How did you get all the way up there?” He reaches up and lifts her down. Bends over, “You’ve hurt yourself.” His touch on her forehead is gentle, but she still winces.

“Susan, promise me you will Never run off like that again. Anything could

have happened to you!”

“But...”

“Susan!”

“I promise.”

She wants to tell him that she has been safe.

“Do you see him, Daddy?”

“Who?”

There is nobody there. It has begun to drizzle again.

“Who, Susie?”

“No one.”

“Come on, then.”

He picks her up and she buries her nose in the side of his neck. Before they enter the wood, she thinks she sees a flash of white shine through the hardening rain.

(3)

The Child's Survival Guide- Lesson 4: How to Talk to God

God is a Big Deal. Whether you think of God as Him or Her, it is best to be RESPECTFUL at all times. This is called PRAYING. You should address God as Lord or Your Majesty or Thou Who Art in Heaven. Under no circumstances should you say things like, Oi! You up there! God will not be pleased and you will never get the bicycle you want for your birthday. It is

always best to start off asking for NOBLE things like World Peace and an End to All Suffering. Then you can get to the important stuff. For example- a new train set, Astronaught Barbie, or for Tiffany Burrows' long hair to fall off her head and for her to be completely bald forever and forever.

Amen.

All week they have been practising with their candles. Little white ones with tin foil around the bottom to prevent the wax from dripping onto their hands. Since this is a rehearsal, the candles are not alight, but Mrs Evans the Sunday School teacher screeches at them from behind, "Don't get too close! Be careful! I don't want anyone's hair to catch on fire!" As they walk, they sing Once in Royal David's City. Susan is second from the front. Behind Tiffany Burrows. As usual. She has spent the best part of her school career in this position. Tiffany always just beats her at everything. It is very annoying. She is one of those perfect little girls who will grow up beautiful and serene, without ever having had a pimple or a moment of self-doubt. She wears gorgeous frilly pink dresses that never get dirty, has long, straight blonde hair and a dimpled smile. Susan's own hair is short and ferociously curly. It is mostly tangles, and her smile is mostly absent teeth. On Christmas Eve, Tiffany is going to sing the entire first verse of the hymn all by herself. Solo. Susan joins in on the second verse and then everybody joins in on the last two. This is not good enough for Susan. It has made her bitter.

"I can sing just as well as her, Mummy!"

"I know, darling. But aren't you glad you get to sing a duet?"

She slurps her tea and scowls. This is not about Duet. It is about Solo. After

all, *she* is the Mighty Summoner of Fairies, The Seer of Ghosts, the Almost Saviour of England. She watches the retreating back of her mother with a ping of dissatisfaction. Tiffany Burrows got the solo because she has the Right Kind of Mummy. A Mummy who arranges the church flowers and is on all the committees. Who drives a neat little sedan and bakes things. Her own mother is woefully inadequate by comparison. She says things like, "Fu...I mean flowers!" She smokes. She reads too much and has too many opinions. Her bottom waggles most shamelessly when she walks. Susan would complain to the fairies, but she isn't talking to them after the incident at Hadrian's Wall. It is time to take things to a Higher Authority.

She thinks of God as an elderly man with a long white beard and bare feet. A bit like a thin Father Christmas, and with the same jocular expression.

Imogen calls God She and Andrew doesn't believe in Him at all. He rarely goes to church with them. When they arrive back home he is reading the Sunday newspapers and playing classical music. The twins hate classical music. It reminds them tomorrow is Monday. They are subdued and quarrel only half-heartedly. The sound of violins oppresses them and they creep upstairs to their bedrooms. It is on a Sunday that Susan tells Sam her secret. "I spoke to God last night."

He stops playing with his car and rocks back onto his heels, mouthing forming a small O. She lowers her voice to a whisper.

"I asked Him to make Tiffany Burrows go bald!"

"But Susie...isn't that bad?"

"No. I didn't ask for her to be bald forever. Just for Christmas Eve."

"But that's when," he pauses. "Ohhh." Shakes his head.

"You can't tell anyone!" She can see he is hesitating. "If you tell anyone, I'll flush Miranda down the toilet!" This is the standard threat. Miranda is her doll; blonde-haired and blue-eyed, she can actually walk *and* cry tears. The method is to dangle her above the toilet bowl by her feet. "I'm going to drop her, I'm going to drop her!"

It always works; Sam hates to see Miranda cry.

"No, don't! I promise I won't tell!"

"Good." She picks up her car and makes the wheels whizz with her fingers. Sam chooses a truck. It is his ambition to be ^a truck driver when he grows up. They look so important, sitting high above the world in their enormous lorries. He would drive a bright red one from one end of Britain to the other, hooting his horn at any car foolish enough to get in his way.

"Did you ask God for anything else?"

"Yes. I also asked for Mummy and Daddy to stop fighting."

They stare at each other for a few seconds. There are noises from downstairs. He pushes her car aside.

"Mine's bigger 'an yours."

When a child does a Bad Thing, it is likely that he or she will be punished. Everyone knows this. The boy who cried 'Wolf' and was eaten alive by wolves when nobody came. The little girl who couldn't take off her red dancing shoes and danced herself to death. Culture is draped with the small corpses of children who have misbehaved. Through their deaths are woven the monsters and threats intended to terrorise and subdue. The boogeyman will get you. Susan is aware of these. Unfortunately, because she thinks Tiffany Burrows has it coming, she doesn't believe that they apply to her.

She isn't behaving badly, she is doing the world a favour. Tiffany will be infinitely more tolerable bald. She is probably right. Still, there is a punishment hovering over her head. It has green skin and smelly breath and it is waiting to get her.

All the week before Christmas Eve, she watches Tiffany carefully for any sign of imminent baldness. She follows her around at practices, trying to get a good view of the top of her head.

"What are you looking at?"

Susan tries to appear cool, "Nothing."

Although nothing is what happens, she remains confident. She has plenty of faith and is good at praying. The night before the service, she sends up a special reminder.

"Dear God, I know you are old, but please do not forget what I have asked. Thankyou very much. This is Susan Owen." She imagines Him listening attentively and writing down details on an immense celestial notepad : *Susan Owen; Requests substantial hair loss of annoying classmate.* When she closes her eyes she has visions of a Tiffany bereft of hair. Naked head shining purply like a plum. She falls asleep smiling.

"Sausage, time to wake up. It's your big day!"

Her mother is leaning over her bed, ruffling her hair. She sits up and stretches. Opens her mouth and says, "Erk." Imogen blinks at her. She tries again. "Erk? Errrk!" It is all she can manage. Her voice has disappeared, her throat is gravel. The whole of the morning she sucks lozenges and drinks medicine. Has her throat massaged. At one o' clock her mother phones Mrs Evans. "I'm sorry, but her voice has completely gone. Happened overnight.

she clutches her mother's hand and knows that it is watching. She avoids looking for as long as she can, but eventually she can't help herself. She turns around and the face looks back, a silent oval sphere. She is reminded of a trip her class took last June to an abandoned monastery hidden in the Hampshire countryside. They left Portsmouth on a khaki-coloured bus with a frumpy, middle-aged driver called Mr Frost. He wore a muddy green cardigan and had a tonsure of grey hair above watery eyes and a blood-blistered nose. He did not say much, occasionally clearing his throat with a gargling sound and spitting out of the open window. The children sang as they wound through the city and out into the country,

*There were ten in the bed and the little one said roll over, roll over,
So they all rolled over and one fell out, he hit the floor and gave a shout
OW! Please remember to tie a knot in your pyjamas,
Single beds are only made for One, Two, Three, Four...*

Mr Frost hawked and spat and frowned. It was wonderful to watch the landscape change from grey concrete to trees and fields. There were less and less houses, and they got bigger and further apart. Susan's friend Elizabeth plaited her hair and chewed on a strawberry sweet. "I'm going to have one of those when I'm big. And a swimming pool." She lives in narrow Victorian house with her parents, her fourteen year old brother and a foul-tempered Persian cat that hisses whenever you try to pick it up. Susan is glad Sam is the same age as she is, because Ben treats Elizabeth as though she were a slimy bug he has been kind enough not to step on. They are not allowed within a twenty metre radius of his room, are warned off by stickers all over his door. *Keep Out! Trespasser's Will Be Prosecuted! Enter At Your Own Risk!* The girls disapprove of such unfriendly behaviour so they do their utmost to get into the room, which has acquired a thrilling mysteriousness.

They sneak in when he is not home, and are disappointed to discover only a mess of clothes on the floor, car posters on the walls and a funny, thick smell of old socks and something Unnameable.

"Look, we're nearly there!" Susan peered over her friend's shoulder and saw the rise of the Abbey above a cluster of trees. Their teacher told them it had been destroyed during the reign of Henry the Eighth, after the Catholic Church refused to allow his divorce from Catherine of Aragon. The monks were killed, their stores of wealth plundered. All that remained were ruins standing melancholic in the grass, almost knee high in places, and scattered with yellow daisies. Under the warm, bright sun it was ordinary enough and during lunch, after a guided tour by a thin man in jeans and a t-shirt, the children played hide and seek between the stones. Wandering off from the others, Susan thought she saw a flicker of movement. She followed it into the shadows, where the air was cooler, and found a gap between some tumbled masonry. She squeezed in and grinned triumphantly to herself. No one would find her here. The voices of the other children seemed very far off, hardly real. She could easily picture the monastery as it must have been five hundred years before. The monks walking hooded and silent through cold passages, feet making shuffling sounds on the stone floor. Candlelight quivered, casting eerie phantoms upon the walls and offering little comfort from the bitter winter wind outside that had blanketed the monastery in snow. A shiver slipped along her skin, but she didn't think the monks could have bodies, because beneath their coarse brown robes they appeared not to feel how cold it was. Chanting in low, impassive voices they passed her slowly and she retreated further into her hiding place. Then the last one paused to sniff the air. As his head turned towards her, she saw that instead of a face there was only blackness and a gleaming pair of red eyes. With a

gasp she opened her own and struggled out between the ruins. Running towards the sunlight, she heard Elizabeth yell,
"I see you, Susie! I see you!"

Now the statue sees her too.

"Ouch! Don't grip so hard, Susan."

She presses her lips together and doesn't say anything. Punishment.

"There are the Elliots. Come along." They walk to a pew near the middle of the church. The adults hug or shake hands. There are guffaws. Mr Elliot pats her on the head. "How are you feeling? Bad luck about the cold. I hear Tiffany's going to sing both verses by herself now. She smiles politely and decides that if he tries to pat her again she will bite him. Hard. The Bishop stands and raises his hands in the air. "Ladies and Gentlemen, if you would please stand, we shall begin the service with a procession by the children from the Sunday School. They will sing *Once in Royal David's City*, which you will find on the first page of your song sheets. The first two verses are to be sung by Miss Tiffany Burrows, but you are free to join in from the third should you wish."

They stand and the lights dim. From the back of the cathedral comes the sound of a single voice. It is pure and beautiful. Even Susan has to admit.

"Once in Roooyal David's City, stood a loowly cattle shed..."

Between her father and her mother, she cranes her neck to see the line of children as they pass, their candles flickering. Tiffany's hair is loose, forming a nimbus of gold around her head. She is an angel. Susan tries not to be sick. This is almost more punishment than she can take. Behind the singing girl walks James Alcott. He is large and chunky, with a benign

freckled face. He is also the clumsiest boy in school. Her insides twist because she knows what is going to happen. She bites her lip until she can taste blood. She hadn't meant for Tiffany to go bald quite like this. Sure enough, in the middle of the second verse, the abnormally large left foot of James Alcott catches a paving. He stumbles forward. His candle leans with him. Tiffany shakes her hair and WHOOMP! It is on fire. She isn't quite sure what happens next. There is a nasty smell. Screaming. Shouting. Adults rushing to the rescue. Someone with rapid reflexes wraps a coat around the girl's head. The Bishop leaps forward with a chalice full of wine and pours it on the shrieking figure. She closes her eyes. OhnoOhnoOhno, don't let me have killed her! Her mother pulls her to her side. "Oh dear God." Exactly, thinks Susan. She can't breathe with her nose so squished against Mum's jumper. It is like drowning in a sea of itchy wool and perfume and she gasps for air. Perhaps the Guilty deserve to suffocate.

"Thank God it wasn't too serious." The twins are sitting on the sofa drinking hot chocolate. For the shock. Dad squats next to them.

"Are you two all right? You mustn't worry about Tiffany. She's going to be just fine."

Sam splutters in mid-swallow. He will never forget the sight of the sooty remains of her hair. Singed to a couple of centimetres below her ears. He nudges his sister with an accusatory elbow. It says, YOU DID THIS. She offers Andrew a trembling smile, "We're okay, Daddy."

They must never know that she is responsible. They will disown her. When her father turns his back, she gives her twin the most threatening glare she can muster. Mouths the words, Miranda. Toilet.

That night she huddles under her blankets. It will be Christmas tomorrow and she can barely stifle her sobs. Because she is a bad person. Because Tiffany was so afraid. Because now that God has granted her first request, He isn't going to grant her second.

(4)

Susan is leaning against a wall. Her hands are behind her back and she runs her fingers along its painted surface. There are knobbly bits and small dents which her fingers explore cautiously because one of them might turn into a tiny sharp-toothed pixie. Sam is next to her. He is standing very still and his face is even paler than usual. Pale and quiet. She looks at her mother, who is kneeling, and sees that she has beautiful eyes. She hasn't noticed before, but here they are, blue and almond-shaped and fabulously lashed. Eyes hiding behind glasses. Dad is speaking. He says, "I'm going to move out, but you'll still see me every day and I'll always be your Daddy." Her parents are nervous. They talk softly and hold the twin's hands. They are waiting for tears. But the twins are mute. Later that evening, she will go into Sam's room and sit on the end of his bed. They will stare silently at each other for what feels like a very long time. Then she will get under the covers with him and lie in silence because there will be nothing to say.

Imogen and Andrew were married in an Anglican church on a warm African Saturday morning. She was Bride of the Month and you can see why from the photos. Blonde hair in waves down to her shoulders, a perfect straight

nose. (Susan will always envy this nose. Her own ski-jump of a snout will cause a lifelong obsession with noses in general.) Andrew stands beside her on the church steps. If you glance at their faces you might think they'll be together until they are eighty, clacking their false teeth at each other from rocking chairs. But if you look closely you might also notice grains upon their skin, tiny marks of future guilt and anger. You are amazed that they are so young and unknowing, locked in the ignorance of their present. You want to walk into the photograph and pull at their hands. "Stop smiling," you say. Soon after they are married, he is conscripted into the police force. It is the middle of the civil war. He eavesdrops outside the windows of suspected terrorists, only to find himself listening to conversations about the price of cattle, a black constable whispering translations in his ear. He patrols villages where the children run away from him, shouting in a language he doesn't understand. "Imbwa! Imbwa!" They flee before him and the dog that has become his constant friend. Romeo is a stout bull terrier, black patch pirate-like over one eye, tongue lolling from a canine grin. "Imbwa!" shriek the children, feet beating against brown paths. Romeo stops and sniffs a clump of dry grass. He looks up bemused after the echoing fear of their small voices. "Wuf." His nose butts against Andrew's calf. "WUF!" In the evenings the recruits sit together under the acacia trees that dot the police grounds. As the day's heat evaporates they smoke cheap Rhodesian cigarettes and spit into the dust. "Look at that bleddy dog. Chasing his own tail." Jennings scratches his cheek with blunt fingers. In real life he is a motor mechanic. "Wish I was a bleddy dog sometimes. Wouldn't have to fight this stupid fucking war, just sit on my arse all day licking my balls." The others laugh at this, the mental picture of Jennings squatting to lick.

Andrew watches the dog leap to catch a butterfly. The jaws snap and miss as he falls back onto his paws. "Stupid old bugger." He exhales deeply and the smoke flies out of his nostrils. "Best fucking dog in the world, that." They grunt in assent, smiling at the whip of the tail as it vanishes into the long grass.

They are out on patrol on a Wednesday morning, the sun in their faces. Quiet and alert, sweat collecting in the hollows of their backs. A farmer has reported 'suspicious activity' along the borders of his property, and walks with them through his fields, hand raised against the glare. Grazing in one is a herd of cattle, unusual for this area, which is mostly tobacco. The older man points at the dog and whispers, "Careful of him now, I don't want him at my cows."

"He's well-trained." The captain is reassuring. "He's a police dog." As he finishes his sentence there is a sudden commotion from the corner of the field and the men are instantly on their stomachs, hands to their guns. "WUF!" They realise in horror that Romeo has dashed a path through the cattle. "Jesus Christ! Fucking dog!" The cows scatter with tremulous moos. One of them lashes out a back hoof that catches him on the side. For an instant they see his barrel body arch gracefully through space, twisting like a dancer, then he drops. Out of the grass shoots a dassie the ~~tiny~~ cause of the chaos. It speeds past them, ears flattened against its skull.

The farmer's name is Van Reenen. After the death of the dog, he and his family adopt Andrew as one might a small and sad child, although they already have a tribe of offspring. The couple remind him of Jack Sprat and his wife. One is lean and taciturn, the other fat and comfortable, given to

loquacity. "Ag, welkom binne, my skat!" She presses him enthusiastically to her bosom. "Hoe gaan dit met jou, liefie? How is your sweet wife? Ag, that a man should be so far from the one he loves. Dis vreeslik!" Her husband presses his hand gently upon Andrew's back. They sit outside on the *stoep* and smoke pipes in manly silence. She brings them koeksisters and coffee. ("Jy is te maer! Eat some more!" Smiles at him like a favourite son.) Occasionally Van will shift in his seat and sigh. He rubs his eyes with stained fingers. "My family's been here almost a hundred years." His hands are large and rough, wrapped around his coffee mug. "I don't know anything else. But the land must be shared." He looks out over the vast stretch of country before them. "Ja, it must be shared. It is the only way to end this war."

In December they have a Christmas party and the house is ablaze with lanterns. The night stars hang intimately against a backdrop of insect noise and music that is over twenty years old. Imogen leans against the verandah railing, arms bare, listening. There are footfalls behind her and the smell of pipe tobacco. "It is good to finally meet you after all that Andrew has told us about you." She turns to smile at the stiff old man, "It is good to meet you, too." They stand in comfortable silence, looking at the land turned into silhouettes by the night. Cole Porter comes on, softly crooning. Mnr Van Reenen offers her a courtly arm, "Shall we?" As they dance together, his youngest daughter Madeleine emerges from the house onto the dark lawn. She is fourteen and only just aware of her beauty. In a white dress she spins with her hands above her head,

"Pa, kyk na my. Pa!"

"Ja my engel, ek sien jou."

A month later the Van Reenen's car hits a landmine planted in their driveway. Madeleine dies in the arms of her mother, white dress stained red.

The Child's Survival Guide- Lesson 6: The Mid-Life Crisis

A strange but common affliction, the Mid-life Crisis strikes the adult male at any time between the ages of 35 to 50. Females are not immune, but cases are rarer. Such is its impact that it may result in completely changed behaviour patterns. It is prudent therefore, to keep oneself informed as to the symptoms of this disease so that one is able to recognise them in one's own Parent.

- 1) Restlessness: The Parent appears fretful or distracted. He is unable to concentrate when performing even the simplest of tasks.*
- 2) Dress: Ordinary parental apparel is suddenly deemed unsatisfactory. Instead, The Parent seeks to clothe himself in garments of the most lurid and attention- seeking type.*
- 3) Great Ideas: The Parent is often the inspired recipient of a Brilliant and Original Concept. This may cause him to behave irrationally.*
- 4) Awakening of the Consciousness: The Parent, desiring to flout the norm, may choose to embrace an unconventional and bohemian lifestyle. This will include changes in religion, occupation and diet.*

Should any of the above manifest itself in your father, be quick to suppress it. Parents are supposed to be Parents, Not individuals.

During the weekend the twins see their father. He likes to take them to places which he imagines to be Good For Their Health. Consequently they spend a great deal of time outside in the inclement weather, Exercising. Today, Susan is pirouetting across Portsmouth Common.

“Daddy, look at me! Daddy!”

Jump and twist and jump and twist. She is practising for a dance recital, in which she is to play the part of Red Riding Hood. Susan is a mediocre ballet dancer, but her curly blonde hair and green eyes have ensured solo parts and the privilege of giving flowers to the Mayoress. It has not made her popular with the rest of the class, most of whom are better than she. Apart from being good exercise, the leaping serves to distract her from the strange person Andrew has become. He has quit his job as a psychologist and joined Green Peace, spending much of his time running around the English countryside disrupting foxhunts. He is a Buddhist, which means he has a lot of crystals and doesn't eat meat. It is all very peculiar. She longs for a father who wears tweed and watches the footie on Saturdays.

Concentrate. Jump and twist. There is a loud rumbling noise to her left.

“Vroooooom! I'm an aeroplane!” Sam runs into her with his arms outstretched and knocks her over. She lands with a thud on her bottom.

“Daaaad!”

“Samuel, watch where you're going!”

He picks her up. “That's enough for today, let's go to the car.”

She forgets her tears and gives her brother a panicked look. The car is their Nemesis. It is a tiger-striped Mini with purple fluffy seats and belches

sootily at every opportunity with obvious satisfaction. Only one windscreen wiper works. When they stop at traffic lights people stare with their mouths open. They see Susan lying flat on her back pretending to be Asleep or Dead or Very Far Away. Andrew laughs at her and tickles her head.

"You shouldn't worry so much about what other people think, sweetheart." She disagrees. If her parents were more concerned about what other people thought, they might be less embarrassing.

He lives in an old house with a communal kitchen and bathroom. There are cats everywhere. On the stairway, in flower pots, on top of the fridge. The twins try to speak to them sometimes, because they are fond of cats, but receive minimal response. The animals seem hardly able to move. If she were older and more cynical, Susan might wonder if a little something hadn't been added to their food. There are adults wandering about too. They are even shaggier than the cats. They tend to bump into things randomly, like clumsy atoms. "Hey Andy," they say, "your kids are beeyootiful, man." The twins glare at these people ferociously. They are responsible for the change in their father. Like many children, they have been corrupted by Disney at an early age, and entertain wild hopes of reuniting their parents, a la Hayley Mills in *The Parent Trap*.

"Come on twins, sit down at the table. I've made your lunch."

Beaming, he places a bowl of yellow rice in front of each. There are lentil things and brown bits. She stares mournfully at a cat hair protruding from under a raisin. She hates raisins.

"Daddy," Sam pokes his food cautiously with a fork; there might be something alive in there. "Please can we go to Wimpy?"

"Wimpy? WIMPY?" The children cringe simultaneously. A large and bounding person has entered the room. "Ye cannae gae tae Wimpy! It's food fer the fokkin' devil!" Morris is well over six feet and has frightening amounts of facial hair. Unlike the other inhabitants of the house he is as boisterous as an overgrown Tigger and the children find him exhausting. He slaps Sam heartily on the back and the boy winces,

"Gae on, eat ye fokkin' veggies!" He pulls out a chair and gives them a whiskery grin. Then leans forward and lowers his voice conspiratorially, "So... what dae ye think of ye Dad's new girrlfriend?"

The twins are suddenly absorbed by their food. As an obstacle to Parental Reunion, the Girlfriend is taboo.

But Hairy Morris is not easily ignored. He jabs Susan with a porky finger. "Hmmm?"

She scowls at him. "I don't know."

"Ye don't know? How ken ye no' know?"

"They've only met Lisa a few times." Andrew gives them each a glass of water. "Shouldn't you be helping Sarah at the market today?" Sarah is Morris' wife. She is as tiny as he is large, with short, spiky blonde hair and dangly earrings. They sell crafts imported from obscure third world countries; dolls, clothes, masks. Both Morris and their father wear shirts from Zimbabwe, brightly coloured and covered in the strange shapes of animals and birds.

"Andrew is our Afrikander," Morris liked to say. "I'm jus' a Scotsman wi' a taste fer the exotic." Susan is always amazed by his ignorance. She knows that Dad is not Afrikaans, he was not even born in Africa. He was born in Bradford.

"Daddy is not Afrikaans. He is English."

Morris would feign a horrified expression. "Really? No! Andrew, ye lying bastard, I didnae know you were ENGLISH!" He staggered and clasped his chest, "Et tu Brute? A mortal blow, a mortal blow."

Susan cannot understand this dread of Englishness. At least it is better than pretending to be something which you are not. For all his joviality, she thinks Morris a phony in his African clothes and his Indian sandals. He is trying to inhabit a skin that doesn't fit him and she distrusts him for it.

The finger jabs again. "So, what dae ye think of her?"

She would like to bite him, but Andrew intervenes, "Let them eat, Morris."

"Okay," no harm intended. He stands up and pats her on the head. "I'd forgotten I was supposed tae help Sarah today. She'll kick my arse if I'm any later." He bounds out of the kitchen, "Cheerio, kiddies."

"I don't want to eat this, Daddy."

"Well you have to, food should not be wasted and I'm not taking you to Wimpy."

She feels her jaw set. The talk of The Girlfriend has agitated an anger in her that burns in her throat. She is angry most of the time, at adults especially. They have all the control and she is powerless against them. Has to eat grotty bean sprouts and raisins, has to tolerate the teasing of Hairy Morris, has to share her parents with Other People.

"I don't want to eat it!"

"Susan..."

"I won't!"

"Then you can stay here until you change your mind."

She doesn't say anything, just sits with her lower lip hanging. Her brother

eyes her smugly over a fork of rice.

"Look Daddy, I'm finished."

"Good boy."

He picks up Sam's plate and rinses it under the sink before stacking it.

"Let's leave your sister to think about finishing hers." He takes his son's hand and leads him out of the room. "Don't even think about throwing it away, because I'll check the dustbin. You know where to find us once you've eaten it all."

Susan sits alone in the empty kitchen and glowers at her food. She can sulk forever if necessary, her frail skeleton crumbling to dust when touched by the hand of some intrepid explorer a thousand years from now.

"Dear God, Smith. Look what they made their children eat."

Smith peers at the remains of Susan's lunch. Unlike her, it has hardened and solidified over time and is now cement-like. His face twists in disgust under his pith helmet.

"Barbaric, utterly barbaric." He takes out a handkerchief and daintily wipes the dirt off the ancient plate. "No wonder this civilisation died out prematurely." Then his voice rises in excitement.

"I say, what's this? By Jove, it's some form of writing!"

Harrumphing under their moustaches, the two men lean breathlessly over the table to read the words scrawled onto the decayed wood. Fortunately they are well-versed in extinct languages.

"I do believe it says," Smith pauses dramatically, "Johnson, I do believe that it says..."

"HELP ME."

They look at each other aghast and Johnson shakes his head sorrowfully.

"Poor child. It must have been a dreadful existence."

An hour and a half later her father returns to find her motionless in front of her now cold food. He takes her plate and makes a sound under his breath. She looks up at him triumphantly. She has won the battle. "I told you I didn't want to eat it."

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It is a Friday afternoon at the cinema. The boy on the big screen is running through a car park, chased by adults in lab coats. He has stolen something from them, or perhaps it is the other way round and he is taking back what belongs to him. Susan can't remember, but she knows what it is like to be at War with grown-ups. She understands the threat they represent. Somewhere in the back row is a man who is watching her mother. She saw him whilst they were buying popcorn and she has seen him before, following them home from school, driving past their house in an expensive car. Even though she is sitting metres in front of him, she can feel him breathing. Sam emits muffled grunts of excitement as the action on the screen intensifies and Imogen places a hand on his knee. "Shhh, darling." Susan sits rigid and tight-chested. She wants to get up and find the man and kick him. She wants to scream at him, "She is MY MUMMY and you are NOT MY DADDY!" She imagines bloodthirsty endings for him, involving boiling tar and drops off high cliffs. The thought of her mother with another man fills her with a rage that makes her gag. She closes her eyes against the images in front of

her and lets the fury froth in her chest, beat upon her eyelids.

When they leave, the man walks some distance behind them. Mum pretends he isn't there, but Susan knows that she knows who he is. She takes their hands as they cross the road. Sam shoots at imaginary species, "Did you see the space ships, Mummy? Can I go on a space ship, Mummy? D'you think I'd have to fight the aliens." Susan shoots the man. She shoots him straight through the heart. BAM!

You're dead.

But the world is full of bad men. A week later she has a friend to stay. Chloe used to live down the road but has recently moved along with the rest of her large family to another area. She is Susan's Best Bosom Soul Mate. The two girls spend hours together in her bedroom, auburn head against blonde, small voices chorusing in discussion or argument. Tonight they are contemplating an Adventure into the Alley. Neither of them has ever been there after dark before, and it is a tantalising and terrifying prospect. They have already changed out of their pyjamas and lie in the dark, waiting.

"We should say at least four Hail Marys before we go." Chloe is Catholic and knows more about God than Susan, who is a mere Protestant.

"We'll have to be very quiet or Mum will hear us."

"Right."

"Right."

"What's the time?"

Susan checks her watch. "S' nearly ten o' clock."

"Oh." Chloe pulls her duvet up to her face. "Almost time then."

"Almost." They are silent for a minute, each battling her apprehension. It is a clear night outside, and the moon shines palely through Susan's thin curtains. It touches Chloe's delicate face and turns her hair silver. She sits up abruptly.

"Come on."

They climb out of bed and open the door, listening for any indication of an Adult Presence. From the floor below they can hear the sound of fingers striking a keyboard. Imogen is in her study, writing and oblivious to all else. They could run screaming past her nose and she probably wouldn't notice. Still, the girls are cautious. They slip down the two levels of stairs soundless as shadows and sneak into the kitchen. If they are caught they know they will be tried and shot by the firing squad, blindfolded and their hands tied behind their backs. It is very possible that they will be killed on this mission, which they accepted bravely when no one else dared. They must reach the end of the alley and retrieve the secret maps to the enemy hideout, for otherwise the war will be lost and their people enslaved. Susan reaches for the kitchen door and unlocks it. The key makes a loud click as she turns it and they freeze. The sounds from upstairs stop. There is a pause before the typing resumes. Susan is so relieved she gets the giggles and her friend glares at her. Puts a finger to her lips and hisses.

"Shhhh."

She nods shamefully. After all, this is the easy bit, getting out of the garden and into the alley will be much more difficult. The girls slide down onto their stomachs and wriggle across the small lawn commando style.

Fortunately it has not rained for the last few days, so they don't have to worry about mud. When they arrive at the garden door they stand up slowly,

pressed against the wall. They are now directly opposite the lit window of Imogen's study. If she leant back a little she would be able to see them. Very carefully, Susan slides the bolt back and they slink through into the dark alley. They are out of the world of the house now, and into an Other realm. Black and unknown and full of danger. Their hearts are pulsing with a fear so sharp it is almost beautiful.

"For our country," whispers Chloe softly.

"For our country."

Hand in hand they creep through the gloom. The moon above them their only light, their breath turned into misty ghosts by the cold. Night time has transformed the alley into a place of sudden and sinister noises. Susan can see hands reaching out from the walls to grab them. One brushes her face and she whimpers.

"Shhh," says Chloe. "It's only ivy."

They have come to the Turning Corner and can see lamp posts on the street.

"Nearly there."

They walk forward so slowly, Susan thinks they will never reach it. The light seems to recede rather than get closer and her teeth are chattering.

"Come on." The other girl pulls her arm. "We've nearly made it." And suddenly they have. Here is the road in front of them, the street lights making them blink after the dark. They grin at each other.

"We did it!"

"You did what?"

The man is leaning against the wall closest to the pub. His eyes are red under the lights and his breath warm and strong-smelling. He smiles at them.

"You did what little girls?" He leans forward and touches Chloe's hair.

"Aren't you pretty? Always did like redheads." She is frozen, barely breathing.

Susan is filled with rage. She slaps his hand away. "Stop it!"

"You're a feisty little thing." He stoops closer and spit smears her cheek,

"What are you going to do about it?"

She twists and pulls Chloe after her back into the alley. They run as fast as they can, the man's laughter behind them.

Susan didn't tell her mother about the man in the alley, or how she and Chloe crept up to her bedroom and got into her bed. How they held each other, shivering, until they fell asleep and morning came like a wind over the sea.

But she told Sam.

One evening, Imogen finds them in their bath, faces crumpled.

They sit facing each other, toy boats floating between them, weeping copiously.

"Twins, what is it?"

She kneels down next to them and puts a hand on each head.

"The...the bad men, M...m...mummy. They'll h...hurt us." Sam is hardly able to speak.

"What bad men, darling?"

He is gulping so hard for air that the words refuse to emerge.

"Uh..uh..uh..."

"Twins," she can feel the tears beginning to form in her own eyes, "What has happened?"

"He means the burglars and robbers, Mummy. Now that Daddy isn't here, who will protect us from bad people?"

"Oh twins. I promise we'll be safe from bad people. The doors and windows are locked at night. I've got a very sharp saw by my bed and I'll use it against anyone who dares to try to harm us. We could even make traps."

"T...traps?" Sam brightens.

"We could put a swinging axe across the front door..."

"To chop their heads off!"

"Yes, Sam. To chop their heads off. And we could cover the floor with slippery oil so that they'd fall..."

"And break their necks!"

"Yes, and we could dig a moat around the house and fill it with crocodiles."

"And sharks! We could put sharks in, Mummy! They have big teeth!" He is delighted. "And we could have big guns to shoot with! Then not even the aliens will get us! Bangbangbang!"

"So you see, we're perfectly safe."

"But the man will still be there, won't he, Mummy."

"Which man, Susie-Sausage?"

"The one who always follows us. The one with the big car."

Imogen sits back onto her heels and looks at her daughter. "You don't need to worry about him."

Yet Susan is worried. She can feel the worry and the anger ripple through her. They make the walls wobble. They make everything yellow and red. She closes her eyes and thinks of dragons, with fire breath and teeth even sharper than the sharks'. If he comes any closer, she will send them after

him.

Even dragons cannot help her.

Puff the Magic Dragon lived by the sea... She dreams she is struggling up a sand dune under a purple sky. Bright orange flowers explode in the prints left by her feet, releasing a scent that makes it difficult for her to concentrate. Every step is tiring. She is gasping for air. With slow movements she makes it to the top. The sea is a surprising green; flat and smooth and sleepy. It whispers quietly along the edge of the beach, shifting the sand thoughtfully. To her left, in a bed of seaweed, snores a small pink dragon. Not very fearsome looking. She creeps up to him and gives him a gentle prod with her toe.

"Whaa..?"

"Puff," she gets up close to a scaly ear. "Puff, you have to make him go away!"

The dragon gives her a stoned smile. She watches horrified as his dopey grin morphs into the face of the drunk.

" 'Allo," it says, "you're a feisty little thing."

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When the kids run through the alley, they feel like gods.

"AlphaBravoDelta, do you read me?"

"Copy, Zulu One. Operation Bum Face is Go."

There are two gangs who rule the alley. The West Street Terrors and the

Guildford Road Menaces. Usually they are rivals, but today they have joined forces against a common enemy. Mrs Green is a tetchy woman in her mid-seventies, with a particular loathing for small children. One of the alley doors opens into a large parking area. It is also the door nearest to the window of Mrs Green's second story flat.

"Shuuut-uuup You Stupid Kids!"

"Get Away From Here!"

"I'll Teach You A Lesson!"

They have been content to speed screeching under her window, staring straight ahead (never look a witch in the face) but then Timothy Fox had a bucket of freezing cold water dumped on his head from above and it became Personal. After weeks of careful deliberation and planning, it has been decided that she is to be flashed. Not just any flash either, but the most insulting, degrading, humiliating flash known to humankind. The Bum Face Flash.

"Roger AlphaBravoDelta. We are on the move. Over and out."

Each gang is pressed to either side of the door. Simultaneously, the two leaders push it open and the children file out regimentally. Susan is almost on the other side when she notices that Sam hasn't moved. This is her first time in the alley since the night with Chloe, and her nerves are stretched taut.

"Come on!" She tugs on his arm but he shakes his head. "No."

"Is your brother deaf or stupid or something?" It is Clara Connors, brown eyes disdainful.

"Course not!" She tugs again but he clings to the wall. Clara pokes her in the back.

"Get a move on. We leave the wimps and the retards behind."

"Mrrrsss Greeen! Mrrrsss Greeen!" They chant until they can see a shadowy figure approaching the window. "What do you want?"

Instantly they screw their eyes closed (never look a witch in the face), turn around, pull their trousers down and waggle their white bottoms, issuing rude farting noises.

"YOU LITTLE BUGGERS!" roars Mrs Green as they scramble back panting through the door, radiant with victory.

Sam is still waiting.

"Look at the scaredy cat!" crows Clara.

"Leave him alone!" Susan can feel the anger rising again.

But the other girl is relentless. "He's stupid! And he can't hear prop'ly."

"StupidstupidstupidSam!" They all begin to sing it. Susan walks up to her and kicks her on the shin. "Shut-up!" There is an astonished silence until the injured girl begins to cry. The twins grab each other's hands and make a run for it, dodging dustbins and weeds, tripping and hiccuping with fright. But they are not followed. When they get to their garden, she can't believe herself. She turns to him and says, "I wish you weren't my brother." Leaves him standing small and alone. A bruise on his left knee and his hair in his eyes.

The Child's Survival Guide- Lesson 7: Doors

As any child with an iota of imagination will know, Doors Are Not To Be Trusted. Very often, people walk through them never to come back. We are

all of us familiar with the Three Door scenario, whereby choosing to open the wrong door will inevitably lead to your rapid demise or to your transformation into something slimy. Unfortunately, it is inevitable that one generally makes the wrong choice before making the right one. It is similarly inevitable that one is going to have to open some doors during one's lifetime.

Our advice is to Proceed with Caution.

Imogen remembers the first time she called him and he didn't respond, continuing to pile red brick upon blue brick, green upon yellow. She had to shout before he turned around. When the twins were five years old they took him to see a specialist in London. They wore matching woollen Paddington Bear Jumpers that itched infuriatingly. Susan reached her hand down and scratched like a puppy, face contorted. There is a sort of torturous pleasure in scratching. It is almost impossible to stop, but no amount is ever enough. She leant back against the car seat and put her all into it, grunting with effort.

"Aaargh!"

Her over-enthusiastic elbow accidentally caught Sam on the side of the head. He pinched her arm.

"Ow!" She gave him a shove.

"Hey!" He kicked her.

"Twins!" Imogen leant over from the passenger seat but they were well at it, arms locked in mortal combat. "Twins!" The car began to overheat, smoke steaming out from under the bonnet.

"Shit!" Andrew pulled over to the side of the road. "Bloody piece of bloody Italian junk!" He got out into the drizzle and opened the bonnet. Disappeared briefly in white mist. Reappeared. "Pass me the water in the coke bottle, will you?"

"We're going to be late." Their mother's breath condensed as she spoke.

"Well it's not like I planned it, is it?"

He slammed the bonnet shut. The twins jumped.

"If you two behave yourselves, I'll buy you milkshakes. Okay?"

The car started with a wheeze and a shudder.

"We're not going in there." Susan stood defiantly with jutting chin. "We don't like it." The hospital corridor was grey and infinitely long. There were washed-out Van Gogh prints on the walls, sad sighs of watery blue.

"You can't go in, darling. The doctor only needs to see Sam."

She blinked with surprise. "But we...we..." How will he speak without her? Imogen stroked her hair, "Go with the nurse, Sausage." A tall woman in a white uniform took her hand. Her skin was not smooth like Mummy's, it had rough edges. Her fingers were stumpy instead of slender. As she led her away, Susan turned to watch her brother vanish through an opening door.

"But..."

"Come along, dear." The nurse put a hand on her back and gave her a gentle push. "He'll be fine." And so she followed, slipping along the waxy floor, the smell of the hospital cold against her skin.

"He has high frequency deafness. It's inherited." The doctor adjusted her glasses.

"Have an operation to remove his adenoids and he'll be fine, just won't ever be able to join the army or play the violin." She looked at the boy playing on the floor, "Although I expect he's suffered enough as it is, poor little chap. He's lost most of his formative years in learning to communicate."

Imogen walked over to her son and pulled him to her in a hug. "My dear Samuel."

"Aargh, Mummy! Stopit!" He wriggled free and tugged at Andrew's trouser leg.

"Can I have my milkshake now?"

Susan dreamt about faces in the walls. Their concrete surfaces turned elastic and she could see features forming. Eyes bulged and rolled, noses protruded, lips stretched in grimaces. They seemed to be screaming. She knew that these were the spirits of all the people who had died in the hospital, now trapped forever in ammonia and grey.

"Sausage?"

She woke with a start, heart gulping. But there was Sam, apparently unchanged. She got up and gave him a secret pinch. "Don't go away again."

Clara's mother makes the expected phone call. Susan can hear her voice from where she is sitting at the dining room table. It is shrill and accusatory. A verbal pointing. She watches as a skinny forefinger snakes out of the telephone receiver, its nail painted red. It hovers in the air briefly, hunting for her. She cowers back in her chair and her movements catch its attention. It rears like a horse and then dives for her, jabbing. Youyouyou! She screams and Imogen nearly drops the telephone.

"Yes, Mrs Connors, of course. It won't happen again. She is very sorry."

The finger is stabbing and stabbing. Why can't Mummy see it? She runs out of the room and up the stairs, the red nail chasing her. Everything is blurry. Hectic. The familiar becomes sinister, carpets trip her, railings bang against her knees. She flings herself onto her bed and pulls the duvet over her head. Her breathing is impossibly loud. Deafening, almost.

"Susan? She can feel her mother's hand upon her back. "Sausage," what's wrong?"

She balls her fists up presses her face against the sheet. "I hate I hate I hate..."

(7)

The twins were only three when they left Zimbabwe. They flew British Airways with their mother from Harare to Heathrow, where Andrew would be waiting to meet them. He had left months before to find a job. In the aeroplane they struggled to sleep. Susan put her head on her mother's lap, but Sam needed to stretch. Imogen took her pillow and blanket and made a bed for him in the aisle, he was so small and the space he took up minimal. In the dimmed light of the cabin a stewardess with a carefully modulated accent tapped her on the shoulder. "The child can't sleep in the aisle. He's in the way."

"Oh for god's sake," she was tired of the English already, "he's only little and he's exhausted. Is it such an imposition?" The other woman hesitated. These bloody people always caused trouble. She smoothed her uniform with

a professional gesture. "I suppose not, but if anyone complains, you'll have to move him."

"Fine." She felt Susan shift against her body and reached down to stroke her hair. Caught between the blonde strands was a tiny white flower. Jasmine. It grew in the garden behind their house, the one in Lawson Avenue that she had loved. She insisted upon planting as many jasmine bushes as possible. By the pool, along the pathways, underneath their bedroom window, and she would wake up on a summer's morning to a smell so enchanting she had to close her eyes against it. Remembering, she picked the flower gently out of her daughter's hair and held it to her nose. The scent was still quite strong, though the petals were crushed. Her hand trembled and it slipped between her fingers, falling between the seats where she couldn't find it.

They arrived to a February sleet which chilled Imogen through her layers of clothing. She had underestimated the cold and was unprepared for its bite on her skin when they left the airport building. Andrew took the children's hands and they wobbled unsteadily next to him on their short legs, peering out from under woolly hats. A few days ago they were running naked around the garden, their bodies smeared with suncream. She had taken a photograph. In the underground car park he led them to a small blue Fiat, its brightness almost insulting against the grey.

"Here we are."

"Daddy," Sam's voice echoed eerily, "What place is this?"

"It's England, darling. And it's not so bad, is it?" He looked at her and she thought of her jasmine and the house left behind in Africa.

"No, not so bad."

It is the fairies who let Susan know first.

Over-half term Imogen takes the twins to visit an old friend newly arrived from Zimbabwe. Caroline and her two daughters live in a renovated farmhouse in Devon and it is the most beautiful place in the world. When they finally arrive, Susan holds her breath because she is afraid that at any sudden movement, the house will disappear in a puff of fairy magic. Double-storeyed and thatched, with ivy creeping up its walls, it is the kind of place she thought existed only in story-books. Smoke wisps out of the chimney. There are fields all around and a small wood to the left. She can hear sounds of neighing horses and, slightly fainter, the burble of a river. Out of the house emerge a woman and two girls close to her own age.

"Imogen! God, it's been years."

"Caroline."

They embrace. The children eye each other warily. The girls are blonde and tanned, uncomfortable in their winter clothes. They have a careless confidence that is intimidating.

"This is Jessica and Emily. Say hello to the twins, girls."

"Hello."

"Sam, Susan. Say hello."

"Hello."

"Come inside." Caroline takes their mother's arm and they walk towards the open door. The taller of the girls tosses her pretty head, "I s'pose you'd better come too." She flounces imperiously away, long hair swinging. The twins obediently follow, shouldering their rucksacks with resignation.

"She's nearly thirteen so she thinks she knows everything." Unlike her

sister, Emily is short and compact with a smudge of freckles on an upturned nose. Her hair is cut like a boy's.

"This isn't really our house, y'know. We're looking after it. In Zimbabwe we had our own house." She has a strange accent, blunt and soft at the same time. They enter a passage, hooks on the wall for coats and Wellingtons lined up underneath. Straight ahead are stairs leading up to the second floor, the right side opens into a large sitting room with a log fire and bay windows. Susan can't see the kitchen but she's sure it has an Aga and copper pots and pans hanging from the ceiling. She shivers with delight.

"Girls, why don't you show the twins their rooms. Then maybe you can take them for a walk."

"Do I *have* to go, Mom?" Jessica's face is pained. "They're just kids." The word comes out as *kuds*. They're just *kuds*.

"Of course." She turns to her friend, "God. She's desperate to be sixteen and she's not even thirteen yet. Bloody nightmare."

"I heard that, Mom!"

Caroline waves a dismissive hand, "Whatever. Just do me a favour and do as you're told for once. Come on, Gen, let me make you a cup of coffee."

Jessica stalks ahead across the field, her long legs easily out striding them. The other three hurry behind her.

"Where's your Dad?" Susan is slightly out of breath.

"He doesn't live with us anymore. He's in Zim." *Zum.*"

"Ours doesn't live with us either." She adds hastily, "But he's coming back."

"I wish I could have stayed with Dad in Zim. It's so much better than here."

"Really?" She can't imagine anywhere better than here.

"It's hotter and there's more space and it doesn't rain so much. I had friends." Emily stamps the muddy ground with her Wellies. "I hate England. I hate it. I want to go home."

The vehemence in her voice is unnerving and the twins exchange a glance. They have reached the woods and Jessica's voice echoes towards them mockingly,

"Hurry up, slow coaches."

They break into an ungainly trot, hampered by their boots. Pushing through bracken and thorn bushes, damp ferns and wild flowers, they eventually reach a stream. Susan's tights have been ripped by the thorns. She examines her legs. They are covered in tiny cuts, drops of bright blood welling to the surface of her pale skin. But the stinging feels good and she smiles. It is the sting of adventure, of forests and secrets and discovering.

"Come on!" Jessica is standing on a log stranded in the middle of the stream. She is like a princess, corn-coloured hair flung about her pink cheeks.

"I said, *come on!*" The children plunge in, half-wading, half-running. In places the water is deep enough to reach past their knees and Susan feels the cold smack against her thighs with a shriek of chilly pleasure. An immense and wild joy rises in her chest as she runs, the water splashing her face. She is no longer a girl, but a horse, untamed and magnificent, galloping through the brown ripples of the stream and up onto the green banks of the other side. She shakes her mane and neighs softly to herself.

"What are you doing?" The older girl's voice is derisive.

"I'm a horse."

"Let's all be horses!"

"Don't be stupid, Emily."

"You're the stupid one!"

"No you are!"

Their quarrelling turns the air sour and Susan pushes past them. "You don't have to be a horse, but I am. Come on, Sam." She rears back with a neigh and prepares to canter into the undergrowth.

"Wait, we'll be horses too!"

Jessica sighs. "Fine. But you're going the wrong way. The path's over here. And I have to be the leader."

They gallop home, whinnying their wildness to the world.

That night Susan dozes to the sound of Emily's soft snores. She is on a mattress on the floor, warmly wrapped and cosy. The horses arrived home to cries of consternation from their mothers and were forced to return to lowly human form.

"Dear God, you're all soaking!"

"Sausage, what have you done to your legs?"

"Baths for all of you!"

Then they had hot tea and crumpets dripping butter. Susan felt as though she'd been transported into an Enid Blyton novel, where the children eat thick wedges of toast and jam after adventures with pirates, and are snuggled into enormous blankets in front of the fire. They say things like, "What a jolly good time, chaps!" in poncy public school voices and slap each other on the back in a Hooray Henry sort of a way.

"Jolly good, by George!"

She stretches and curls her toes. Blissful. She is almost asleep when there is a whirl of wings above her head. They brush past her nose and she has to

muffle a sneeze.

"Suusie," in the dark their smiles glow wickedly. "You've been a bad girl."

"No I haven't." Four of them land on her stomach and dance together in a circle, "Liar, liar your bum's on fire!"

"Go away! I'm too old for you! I'm ten now!" She is terrified they will wake Emily.

"Really?" They roll their eyes in mock hurt. "Did you hear that? She's too old for us!"

"Leave me alone!" She wriggles violently as the fairies descend around her ears.

"Punishment, Susan."

"For setting Tiffany's hair on fire."

"For hitting Clara Connors."

"For growing up."

"The lions are going to eat you when you get there."

She starts to cry. "When I get where?"

"When you get to Africa." And then they are gone.

The next morning she can't eat her breakfast. She sits after the others are done, pushing it around her plate.

"Aren't you going to finish your bacon and eggs?"

She shakes her head. "Not hungry."

Imogen puts a hand to her daughter's forehead. "You don't have a temperature. Are you all right?"

"Yes. Just not hungry."

"Well if you're sure...go and clean your teeth. You don't want to keep

everyone waiting.” They are going for a walk on Dartmoor today. Perhaps they will see ponies.

“In Zimbabwe,” says Emily as they trudge up the stairs, “our garden was so big you could have kept ponies in it.”

“Oh.”

“And we didn’t need to put on Wellies every time we went for a walk.”

Susan digs in her bag for an extra pair of socks. It is cold outside. She puts them on and pads to the bathroom to clean her teeth.

“In Zimbabwe, we used to go to Lake Kariba and see the crocs. Big ones with teeth this long.” Emily holds her hands out, suggesting canines of Sabre Tooth Tiger proportions.

Susan brushes her own more modest ones, swills, spits and pads out again.

“Suuusan, Eeemilyyy! Hurry up!” Jessica is standing impatiently at the end of the corridor, “We’ve been waiting in the car for you!”

“We’re *coming*, bossy boots!” She pulls a tongue out at her sister, who pulls one back.

“Stupid!”

“No, *you’re* stupid!”

“No, you are!”

“Shut-up!”

“No, *you* shut-up!”

“Oh will you both just put a lid on it please?” Caroline shouts from the bottom of the stairs. “You’re holding everyone up and I’m sure Susan doesn’t want to hear your bickering, do you, Susan?”

The girls look at her. It never pays to agree with an adult in front of other children.

"Er..."

"That's what I thought. Now get a move on please." They stomp down, the two sisters still hissing at each other.

"Stupid!"

"Stupid yourself!"

In early autumn the moors reflect beige and mauve back to a cloudy sky. Under their feet the grass is damp and slightly slippery, threaded with small stones. They have been walking for at least an hour now along a path that has led them up and along the downs, the land around them thick with low bracken and gorse bushes. The children do not stay on the path, but have leapt ahead of their mothers, so that the two women are quite far behind. There is something fierce about the countryside that makes them reckless. They are playing a new game, adding *a willy* to the ends of people's names. To tell someone they are a willy is a terrible affront; almost unforgivable. Since Sam is the only boy, he receives most of the insults and responds with gratifying ferocity, lunging for the girls with a roar. He is easily provoked, and can quickly lose his temper in a whirl of kicking and shouting that belies his usual quietness. His frustrations exploding in a small hurricane of fury.

"Sam's a willy, Sam's a willy, Samawilly Samawilly Samawilly!"

"STOPIT!" The girls are delighted. They flit past his fists and taunt him mercilessly. Then Susan flings her head back and crows,

"Samawilly MacWilly!" Jessica and Emily hoot with laughter at this stroke of comic genius, but it is too much for him. His face takes on a purple tinge and his breathing grows heavier. With a yell he springs after his sister who turns and flees across the undergrowth, down the side of the hill, running for

all she is worth. Although he is faster, her ballet classes have made her nimble and she hops over the bracken as he stumbles clumsily in rage. At the bottom of the hill is a copse of trees and she races through them, not daring to stop. If he catches her he will hit her, and her best hope is to outrun and exhaust him. With an abrupt halt she arrives at the edge of a river. It is not deep, but the water flows swiftly and is cold. For a moment she hesitates, but she can hear him thundering down the hill behind her. Quickly she jumps out onto a rock raised above the water, wobbles slightly and then hops onto another. She has reached the middle of the river when the rocks end. Susan glances over her shoulder and sees Sam stepping onto the one behind her but she can't escape. It is too far to jump to the other side. She feels the pull of his hand on her jumper and swats him off. He grabs her arm and she totters, snatching at his shirt. They sway to the left. To the right.

"Leggo!"

"You called me a willy!"

Before she can reply there is a shout to their left, "TWINS!" Even as she looks up she feels her feet give way and shrieking, they fall. Susan goes in head first and the shock of the cold is almost enough to make her heart freeze. She turns and tumbles trying to fight the current and right herself. As she twists she can see fairies swimming past, their hair and wings streaming behind them. They float alongside her face and time seems to decelerate. They are covered in tiny air bubbles and move in dreamy silver strokes. Next to her, Sam's legs kick in slow motion. Then her feet touch the bottom and cool air slaps her face as she stands. The water just reaches her chest. Sam is still floundering and she drags him up by his collar.

"Y...you c..can st..stand." She is shivering so much it is difficult to speak.

They stare at each other, shuddering and sodden.

"TWINS! Twins, oh my God!"

Their mother is careering down the hill towards them and they begin to drag themselves back against the current. She sloshes in and grabs them each by a hand.

"Stupid children! Bloody fucking hell!"

She hauls them up onto the bank and shakes them.

"What *is* the matter with you! That was *very* naughty! Do you hear me?

NAUGHTY!" They nod, trembling and she softens.

"You're soaked through. Good thing we brought some spare clothes and a couple of blankets."

"God, look at you kids." Caroline is short of breath. "Don't think I've ever run so fast in my life." She bends over a rucksack and pulls out some jerseys and tracksuit bottoms. "We'd better get you dried and changed. Here are some socks, too."

The women wrap them in the blankets and are soon whipping off their wet clothes. Jessica and Emily gawp unashamedly, eyes round.

"Mummy, they're looking at me!" Sam's voice is querulous.

"Girls, turn around."

"But Mom..."

"Turn around!"

Imogen pulls a jersey over Sam's head. "What made you two behave so stupidly?"

"She called me a willy."

It is so blissful to put on something warm that she doesn't argue. She hangs her head shamefully. "I did."

"Susan, you shouldn't tease your brother and you shouldn't call him a willy. You wouldn't like to be a willy would you?"

She shakes her head. "No."

Caroline snorts, "They have their uses."

Susan looks back at the river, searching for any flicker of fairy life. There is no sign of them, but she knows they won't stay away for long.

After another hour of walking, they loop back to where the trail began. The children are tired and quiet, huddling together on the back seat. The mist is descending and the sun has faded.

"Let's go and find somewhere to eat." Caroline starts the engine and they pull out of the parking area. The road is narrow and winds past fields and hedgerows, the car's headlights casting brief pools of illumination upon the shadowed countryside. Susan stares out of the window and is pulled by magic. It pulses against the glass and throbs through the gathering dusk. The trees seem alive. She presses her fingertips to the pane and the cold sinks into her skin. They leave marks only just visible against the black.

"Here we are. Come on kids, hop out." She has stopped outside a pub, glowing like a Christmas tree in the dark. As they troop out towards the warmth of the lit windows, Susan turns briefly to listen to the whisper of the woods and hills behind her.

"Sausage?"

She hurries forward and takes her mother's hand. "It's dark, Mummy."

"Let's go inside then."

Pubs hold an immeasurable and intense fascination for children. There are

inevitably large signs over the door stating in black and white: *No Under 18's*. But eighteen is a lifetime away and curiosity nibbles at them. What great secrets are hidden in those smoky spaces? What mystery are they not allowed to know? They stare greedily as they pass through the bar, trying to linger in its masculine intimacy. Their eyes take in red leather stools, the groups of men stooped over mugs of beer, voices lowered in conversation. One throws back his head and guffaws loudly,

"That's a load of shite if ever I heard it!"

His friend mock punches his shoulder, "Fuck you and your mother!"

The children's ears crave more of this delicious rudeness and they drag their feet. Only Susan is wary, reminded of the stale breath of the man in the alley.

"Can I help you ladies?" The accent is West country, thick and rolling.

"Do you serve supper?"

"Indeed we do Madam, and the best Yorkshire pud in Devon, if I do say so myself." The old man beams and gestures to his right, "Family room's that way. I'll fetch you some menus."

"Mom, can't we eat here?"

"Of course not, you're too young."

Jessica hates nothing more than being told she is too young. She has been too young her entire life. She tosses her hair and scowls, "I'm not hungry."

"Then you don't have to have anything, but you're not staying here. Come on."

Her daughter flings a last longing glance and stumps after them.

The Family Room low and cozy. There is a log fire burning and they choose the table closest to it.

"This is lovely."

"Well thankyou, Madam. We certainly like to think so. My name's Robert Cornford and I'm the owner of the place, although I'll have to be your waiter this evening. Seeing as how our usual lad is off sick." He pauses to hand them each a menu. "You're not from round here, I can tell."

"We're from Zimbabwe." Emily's small chest puffs with pride.

"Zimwhat? Sorry to say I never have heard of it, lass. Not that I ever did much schooling mind you, so my geography's not the best. Been helping to run the pub ever since I was sixteen like, and I'm too old to go back now although I always was sorry I didn't get more learnin'. Where's this country then?"

"It's in Africa."

"Africa? Really? Well now that *is* a long way off. Always wanted to go to Africa and see the giraffes. No lions, mind you. They'd be a bit too much for the old ticker. But I always did want to see a giraffe."

"I don't like lions either." Susan's voice is so soft he has to bend down.

"You don't like what, little 'un?"

"Lions."

"Well now of course you wouldn't. Great nasty things they are too. I did see a programme once on telly..."

"May I have a glass of your house red please?"

"Pardon? Oh yes, certainly Madam. Let me put that down." He mutters as he writes. "*One glass house red.* Anyways, there was this programme..."

"And may I have a beer shandy? Children, what would you like to drink?"

They reply in unison. "Coke, please."

"And a basket of chips to start off with."

"Oh, hmmm, right." He is momentarily flustered. "Better put that down too. *One beer shandy...*"

When he has finished, Susan tugs gently on his sleeve and whispers,

"I like horses. But we didn't see any today."

"Didn't you, now?"

"I like horses too!"

"And me!"

"Well, well, isn't it a lucky thing that we happen to have a horse of great renown living in this very establishment."

"You do?"

"Yes, indeed. Would you like to meet him?"

The three younger children are thrilled. "Yes, please!"

"Please can we, Mum?"

"All right, Sam. But behave yourselves."

"Oh they'll be no trouble, Madam. I got grandkids their age. Follow me."

He leads them past the end of the bar, through the kitchen, where he grabs a few apples, and out into a large courtyard. There is a stable in the far left corner and he walks towards it.

"Hello there, Barnaby. You got some visitors."

The horse's shaggy chestnut head emerges and it snorts softly.

"This here's Barnaby. I known him since he was a foal and he is the best and bravest horse as ever lived. Sometimes I even think he's trying to talk to me." He chortles, "Don't you go telling anyone that, mind. They'll think old Robert's finally lost his marbles! Now, there's nothing he likes more as a nice juicy piece of apple." He bites into one and spits the chunk out onto his hand. "Watch me closely, like." He flattens his palm and straightens his

fingers before offering the fruit to the horse's probing lips.

"You try now. There's no need to be frightened of him."

"I'm not frightened," says Emily. "In Zimbabwe I fed lots of horses." She takes an apple and copies Mr Cornford, lifting up a flat palm.

"You want a go, lad?" Sam shakes his head.

"I will." Susan approaches the stable and the warm smell of horse fills her nostrils. She can see only the front half of him because the rest disappears into the gloom behind. He is a big animal and she is slightly afraid.

"Here you are, Barnaby." The touch of his whiskery lips on her palm tickles and she laughs. Leaning forward she quickly presses her own to his muzzle in a kiss. The horse considers her with calm brown eyes.

You'll be all right, Susan. Just gallop. They'll never catch you if you learn how to gallop.

(8)

"Mummy's going to take us away. I know it, the fairies said."

They are walking back from school. It is Tuesday afternoon.

"No, she won't. What would happen to Dad?"

She shrugs. She doesn't want to think about it. "Do you think they'll remember us, if we go back?"

"Who?"

"People. People who knew us when we were little."

He pauses outside a sweet shop. He can see friends from school inside.

"Let's get some sweeties." She follows him placidly. The other children are loud and cheerful. They clatter their school bags and talk with mouths full. Susan watches them sadly. There are no lions waiting for them.

"What's wrong with you?" Jeremy Turner lives next door. He is going to play wing for Liverpool and also be the lead guitarist in a rock band. He already has the haircut and squeezes her from under a ratty fringe.

"Nothing."

"Okay."

He shoves a piece of soggy liquorice at her. " 'Ere, you can 'ave it.

Her heart thumps and her cheeks flush as she takes it.

"Thanks."

But his attention has already wandered.

"C'mon you lot!"

They troop out after him as he takes off down the road, untucked shirt flying behind him. "C'mon!" Obediently they break into a trot, but it is hard to keep up with him even when he is standing still. Susan's bag bangs against her side as she runs. She is struggling to chew and breathe at the same time. Ahead of her the slight form of Sam has almost caught up to Jeremy's. He is quicker than she, reed-thin. "Come back," she wants to call to him. She is suddenly in tears, all alone at the rear of the pack of children. They speed away from her and from the jaws of the lion that waits to pounce upon the slowest and the feeblest. She gives up and stops running. Decides to kick anything that dares to eat her. Further down the road, the others have come to a halt outside someone's house. This is a familiar ritual. It has bay windows with expensive frilly curtains that have been draped so that they

hang from the railing in loops. The children think they are the stupidest things they have ever seen. Jeremy takes a step forward,

“Knickerbocker curtains!” His yell sends a thrill of naughtiness up the spines of the others. They shiver with pleasure and apprehension.

“Knickerbocker curtains!”

The sound of their own voices emboldens them and they get louder. Then he rises in a solo, “Your knickerbocker curtains are FUCKING SHIT!”

Everybody stops breathing. Then the children scatter, feet leaping from road to pavement and back again, but nobody comes out of the house. She stands quite still, tasting the shock of the words along with her liquorice. She senses someone next to her and turns her head. Sam. He picks up her bag and kicks the curb with his shoe. “No, they won’t.” She shakes her head clear.

“What?”

“They won’t remember us.”

The Child’s Survival Guide- Lesson 8: Why Not to Grow Up

There are many reasons why growing up is an undesirable process.

Consider the unnecessary complications of the adult world: for example, why is anyone ever short of money when there is plenty of it in the bank? It is obvious to any child that when one is financially desperate, one goes to the bank to receive free monetary assistance, preferably in the form of a Large Lump Sum. What else is it there for, if not to be given away? But perhaps the worst thing about adulthood is Responsibility. This means Standing in Queues, Paying the Bills and Learning How to Behave Yourself (at least In Public).

All most unpleasant.

It is our advice that you refuse to pass the age of twelve. Ignore all social pressure to do otherwise.

She keeps forgetting who it is they are supposed to hide from. Whenever they hear the whistle of the milkman coming down the outside steps, Mum makes them turn off the T.V. "Quick twins, get behind the sofa!" They crouch together stifling their giggles. "'Allo? Anybody 'ome?" She has to bite her lip to prevent herself from laughing. Imogen puts a finger to her mouth. "Shhh." It is a game. The milkman clears his throat. "'Alloooo? I've come for me payment, Mrs Owen."

After a couple of minutes the sound of his retreating footsteps reaches them. The twins peer out from over the top of the sofa with exaggerated sighs of relief.

"Whew, Mummy. That was close, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was," she says.

Then the washing machine breaks down. They come home from school to find her mopping up a flood in the kitchen, her face red. She wipes it with the back of her hand and smiles at them, "There's been a little accident."

After that it is the stove, then a drain pipe bursts, damp seeps through the bathroom ceiling. A hundred little things they cannot afford to fix. Every Thursday afternoon, Imogen goes to the welfare office to collect the dole. She calls it Visiting Aunty State.

"I'm going to visit Aunty State, twins. I'll be back soon. Don't answer the door to strangers."

One wet Thursday in October, Susan is watching The Wombles on telly. She

sings along with the famous refrain, "Wombling underground, wombling free, the Wombles of Wimbledon Common are we..." She thinks it would be very cosy to live underground, where hiding from people would be easy. Then Auntie State could come and visit instead of Mummy having to trudge out in the rain. There would be tea and chocolate biscuits and apple doughnuts, which are the best kind. Suddenly there is a loud bang on the front door. Like a rabbit she freezes. Sam is upstairs and Mummy is out and she is all alone. She closes her eyes and tries to imagine the noise away. Someone is tapping on the window. "Excuse me," they are shouting at her, "excuse me little girl. Is your mother at home?" Standing outside is a man in a dark coat, hair stuck wetly to his skull. He is holding an umbrella which is large and leathery looking, like the wings of a vampire bat.

"Is your mother in?"

She takes a deep breath and is brave, opening the window slightly. "No, she is visiting Auntie State and she said I mustn't open the door to strangers so I can't.

"Auntie State, heh?" His smile is white and very sharp. She nods her head.

"Well, will you give her a message for me?" She doesn't hear him at first because she is staring at the tiny goblin that has emerged from behind his ear to sit on his shoulder. It sticks its tongue out at her with a rude raspberry noise.

"Are you listening to me?"

He shakes his umbrella impatiently. The goblin contorts its face and pulls its mouth down at the corners. Rolls its eyes. Susan stares and stares. Why can't the man see it too? "You have a goblin on your shoulder," she says.

"I what? Listen, tell your mother that if the debts for the house aren't paid

soon we're going to claim it. Okay? That got through to you?" He slides an envelope under the door. "This is from our lawyers." His look is cold as he walks away. On his shoulder, the goblin's head has turned into that of a lion. It opens its jaws wide and goes, "ROARRR."

Susan picks the envelope up from the floor. It has red letters on it which reads: *Final Notice* and is addressed to both her parents. She holds it up to the light and tries to peer through the paper, but it's no good. She can't see anything. For a second she thinks about opening it. What is in here that is so serious? Then she remembers the goblin and changes her mind. Whatever it is, it must be bad. From the television come the ponderous tones of Uncle Bulgaria, "I think, Orinoco, that it is time you learnt a little more caution. A Womble must always be very, very careful ..." The words reach her ears as if from a distance; *very, very careful*. I'll be careful, she thinks, I'll hide it away where it won't be able to upset anybody and then I'll pretend nothing happened.

"Susie?"

She hadn't heard her mother open the door and is startled, trying to conceal the letter behind her back.

Imogen laughs, "You're jumpy. What's that you've got there?"

"Nothing."

"Oh come on, let me see."

"No."

She frowns, "Susan, what is it? Show me now, please."

She gives her the envelope, which seems heavy despite its lightness.

Imogen's eyes scan the writing and her face becomes quiet.

"Sausage, why don't you go upstairs and see what Sam is up to."

"Is it bad, Mummy?"

"Do as I say."

She hesitates and then leaves the room, pausing on the stairs to hear her mother's short sob. There are footsteps and then the phone is picked up. A number is dialed. There is a pause.

"Andrew? It's arrived...when?...This afternoon...I can't...no, I can't...we have to...they're going to fucking EVICT us, Andrew!"

Susan doesn't wait for any more. She climbs the stairs as silently as she can. She can just make out the closing theme tune of her television programme.

*Wombling underground, wombling free, the Wombles of Wimbledon
Common are we...*

Their house is almost two hundred years old. "She's a grand old lady," says Mum. But the paint is peeling off the outside walls and the plumbing grows more fragile with each passing year. It is beginning to look dilapidated. Perhaps because of this, it is also the most child-friendly home in the whole street. Hordes of them gather in the basement where they build elaborate dwellings with sheets and chairs that take hours to construct. Once in a while Imogen will descend absent-mindedly from her study. "Is everything all right?"

"Muuum, you're standing in the lair of the Great Green Snolly Trolls!"

Oh, oops. Right. Sorry. The children run up the stairs and through the passages, down again into the kitchen and outside where they lie panting like puppies. The twins know every part of the house; which stairs creak when you step on them, which corners the spiders are lurking in, which spot to

stand on if you want to make a wish to see a unicorn. Last summer there was a neighbourhood water fight in their garden that had spread out into the alley. There had been people everywhere, grown-ups and children, throwing water bombs at each other, flinging buckets just filled at the tap. One of her mother's friends grabbed a particularly irritating boy by his shorts and pulled them forward at the front.

"Serve you right, you little bugger!" she yelled as she hosed his crotch.

There was so much water, the garden turned slippery and treacherous. Shorts and t-shirts became smeared with brown. Faces were daubed with mud war-paint. Susan felt like an American Indian, whooping a reckless challenge to her enemies, her feet stamping a war-dance. She lifted her face up to the rare blue of the English sky and yelled until her throat was sore.

Come and get me if you dare.

The Child's Survival Guide- Lesson 9: The Explanations of Adults

Suffice to say these are seldom adequate. Generally, an adult will avoid telling a child The Whole Story. They do this because they think you need to be protected. For once, we happen to agree; sometimes it is simply better Not to Know.

Susan is standing on the pavement staring at the *Sold* sign. She has already tried to push it down, but it has been firmly secured and won't budge. She resents it, just as she has resented the couples who have walked through their home guided by a neat estate agent. "It needs some work, as you can see, but it's got so much *character*."

The twins skulk in their bedrooms on these occasions, coming out only after the intruders have left.

“Why do they have to come, Mummy?”

“This is *our* house, Mummy.”

“Why do we have to go, Mummy?”

“I’ve explained this to you, twins. We don’t have the money to stay.”

They were safe while the house remained for sale, able to pretend that nothing was different and that they weren’t going to leave. But things have changed very fast since the Sold sign appeared. Friends come over to help their mother pack, and the house fills with crates and cardboard boxes. Their destination is South Africa.

“Your Granny and Granddad live there and we’ll be staying with them at least for a while. You’ll like South Africa, I promise.” From what the twins have gathered about their future home by watching the news, they know the white people are Bad and Racist, and that black people are Poor and Oppressed. The teenage son of their next-door neighbour has a Free Mandela t-shirt. Susan does not want to be a South African. When Zola Budd sped barefoot into newspaper headlines, she hurtled straight into the derision of the British media. As far as she can tell, it is all right to be black, but nobody wants to be a white South African. It is something to be ashamed of, like having nits and being made to stay away from school. Something a person does not admit to in public.

“Why aren’t we going to Zimbabwe, Mummy?”

“I wish we could.” Her face shifts as she remembers, “Zimbabwe is wonderful. But your grandparents left after the Civil War and moved to South Africa, and I can’t afford for us to strike out on our own yet. Maybe

we'll go back there soon, and you can see the place where you were born.” Susan thinks she doesn't care about the place where she was born, she cares about the place she is in now.

(9)

All the days just before they leave, she is filled with a strange excitement. She forgets about lions and being afraid. At school she is asked silly questions,

“Will you have zebras in your garden?”

“Will you live in a mud hut?”

“Do you have telly in South Africa?”

“Will your skin turn black?”

Susan shakes her head and sighs. They are so *ignorant*. “No, no, no,” she says. She feels wise and exotic in comparison. The teacher takes out an atlas and they find South Africa. It is right at the very farthest end of the continent, a purple shape bordered by pink and yellow and green. She tries to pronounce some of the place names, but her tongue keeps stumbling. Jo..Johannes...burg. Pretoooria. Bloemfont...Bloemfont...she gives up. The words are too dense for her. One of the children traces the path from England with an index finger. “It's very far away, isn't it?” Susan looks. It is.

When she gets home, she searches through the box of records and tapes next to the hi-fi. Music always makes her feel better. She loves to put it on and dance around the sitting room, her feet beating faster and faster while she

leaps and twists. Her entire body becomes absorbed by sound; it is as if nothing else exists except the pulse of a rhythm flaring up from the tips of her toes to her swinging hair. Her favourites are Bob Marley, Madness and New Kids On The Block, but today she is looking for something different. She has to dig past layers of albums and cassettes (Led Zep, The Who, Blondie and an incongruous The Best of Cliff Richard) before she finds it; *Scatterlings* by the South African band Juluka. Susan places it reverently in the tape deck and presses the play button. There is a beep, a short silence and then a drum beat. The voices lift in unison, *Yum bo hum, yah hum bo hum, yum bo hum, yah hum bo*, before the throb of the bass flings her feet across the carpet. She raises her arms above her head and shakes her hips. The music is so deep, so rhythmical, that she vibrates all over, is filled with feeling. Something about it taps right into the very deepest part of her. *Copper sun sinking low, scatterlings and future kings...* As she jumps and sways, the sitting room floor changes into dusty red soil, the ceiling disappears and is replaced by an unrepentant blue sky, the furniture morphs into acacia trees and thorny bushes. Susan closes her eyes and is utterly consumed, even her skin tingles. If this is Africa, then maybe it is where she belongs. She kicks her shoes off and dances wildly until she can hardly breathe and her school uniform clings damply to her back. *Yum bo hum yah hum bo hum, yum bo hum, yah hum bo...and for the scatterlings of Africa, the journey has begun...*

"Susie!"

With a jolt, the room returns to normality and she is back in England, her brow moist with perspiration. She runs a finger along her forehead and licks the sweat off the tip. It has a hot, salty taste.

"You've got the music on much too loud. I could hear it from the study!"

Imogen leans over and turns the volume down.

"I was dancing, Mummy."

"I can see that."

"Am I a scatterling?"

Her mother smiles at her, "I think we all are."

The beachfront is quiet on Sunday afternoons, the promenade vacant and pale under the sagging winter sun. Pebbles extend into the dirty grey of the Solent. They are picked up by the smaller waves and flung rattling against the shore, where they land with cross scraping sounds. At low tide in summer, you can walk for what seems like forever out into the horizon, your feet sinking and squelching delightfully in the wet sand. Today it is too cold for swimming and the twins pull their hoods over their faces as they walk with their father. Susan holds his hand but Sam scampers ahead,

"Look how fast I can run, Dad!"

"Very good, Sam."

Ahead of them looms the arcade, an ugly building crammed with flashing machines that cheat people of their money. The twins have never been allowed into it but they know children who bunk school to stand in front of those machines, eyes glazed and vacant. Andrew stops abruptly and looks out over the sea. "Let's go and say goodbye to the swans."

Opposite the promenade is a park with swings and a see-saw. At it's centre is a small lake. The paddle boats that skim its surface during the warmer months are gone, but the birds are still there. An old man in a crumpled green anorak sits on a bench and throws bread crumbs at the ducks, who

squabble noisily near his feet. Farther out, towards the middle of the lake, two swans glide with aloof elegance. One stops to clean its feathers, black beak disappearing amidst the white. The twins have always been in awe of the birds, their beauty is so untouchable and otherworldly. They wave solemnly, "G'bye swans." They are silent for a while and then Sam sniffs. "Dad, can we have a milkshake?"

He takes them to the Wimpy, where Sam has strawberry and Susan has vanilla. They eye each other over the rims of their glasses to see who can take the longest. He always beats her because she gets greedy, the taste making her tongue thick with happiness. The best part is right at the end of the shake, when you can use your straw to make loud noises. She pushes her glass away and burps with gratification.

'Yummy.' Outside it has started to rain hard. People come running into the Wimpy with newspapers over their heads. They order cups of coffee and commiserate about the weather. The atmosphere is soggily communal. Susan puts her head down on the table and squints up at her father, "What's Africa like, Daddy?"

"Well, let's see...it's very beautiful and there is a lot of space. You can drive for miles and without seeing a single town. And it can be very hot, sometimes too hot to move." He rests his hand on his chin, "It is nothing like England. I loved it there."

She sits up. "So why aren't you coming with us then?"

"I've told you Susie, I have to stay here. But Mummy will look after you."

The answer doesn't satisfy her, but she chooses not to pursue it. His face always seems to get heavy when she does. It pulls down at the corners.

“Will there be any lions where we are?”

“Of course not. They’re all in game parks.” Sam finishes his shake with a slurp.

“Say more about Africa, Dad. Do they have aliens in Africa?” The twins sit kicking their heels against their stools, listening to him talk. It doesn’t feel like the last time they are going to see him.

On their final night, the twins say goodbye to their house.

“G’bye kitchen.”

“Bye sitting room.”

“See you, loo.” It doesn’t seem real somehow, even though after they have gone someone else will own it all. She goes out into the garden to tell the fairies that they are leaving tomorrow. It is very cold and she has to stamp her feet to stop her toes from going numb. “Fairies? It’s me. Hellooo?” They don’t reply. Perhaps she is too old for them. Later, she finds the special and secret corner in the spare room where she goes whenever she needs to cry. The carpet doesn’t quite reach the wall in one place and there is a thin uncovered border that you can only see if you know where it is. It is stained with imperfect circles. These are her marks, made from the tears and saliva bubbles that had dripped from her face. She touches them gingerly. They are fading already.

When she wakes up it is to a bare room. The only furniture left is the bed she is sleeping in, although there are stick marks from where her posters had been. New Kids On The Block. Kylie and Jason. She pulls a face. She was starting to go off Kylie and Jason anyway. Next to her head are a series of

tiny words she scratched onto the wall the night before. They say, "Susan Owen lived here. She was ten. 1990." She stares at them for a few minutes, wondering what the Intruders will think of them. Even if they cover them up, she will know that they were there. That she was there. "Twins! Come and eat." She doesn't want to get out of her bed. She puts the pillow over her head and feels her nose push up against its weight. The world is white and serene, her breath quiet. Perhaps she will lie here immobilised forever, like Sleeping Beauty. The Intruders will tip-toe round her still form with wonder and fear. They would make her room a shrine, and it would always be filled with golden light and the soft cooing of pearly doves.

"TWINS!"

Susan sits up and looks at her slippers and dressing gown. She puts them on and goes downstairs for her last breakfast.

'That's everything.' Imogen is standing with hands on hips. A friend who owns a car is giving them a lift to London. Susan has only been to London a few times before and all she remembers are the enormous buildings and the masses of people scurrying through its streets and tube stations. Once, on a trip with her father, she had got lost in the tube station. Staring at a poster, she didn't notice him disappear into the throbbing crowd. When she turned around and he wasn't there, a panic like no other seized her throat. She ran screaming and weeping through the people and down the long tunnel, "Daddeee, Dadeeee! Where's my Daddy! I want my Daddy!" A tall man in an overcoat had bent down and said, "Go that way. Your Daddy's over there." Then she saw him, waiting for her amidst the streams of commuters. "Daddy." He put his arms around her, 'It's okay, sweetheart. I wasn't going

to leave you. I was waiting for you to find me.”

~~Daddy~~^{He} is not here today.

The twins get into the back seat. They are too tired to fidget or squabble.

They droop in their winter clothes. It is February; summer in South Africa.

Their mother climbs into the passenger seat and turns. “How are you two doing? It’s going to be all right twins. I promise.” They nod together. As the car pulls away, Susan turns to watch the house. It gets littler and littler. They round a corner and it disappears completely.

She waves it a final farewell,

“G’bye house.”

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The Child's Survival Guide- Lesson 10: Being a Stranger in a Strange Land

It is a widely held social myth that children are nice. We know better.

Children can be evil. One encounters this evil especially as a new child in a foreign environment filled with hostile foreign children. There are several combative methods available in such a scenario;

1)Cursing Under One's Breath

Involves placing a hex upon an offending or offensive individual. Done silently,

but with great venom. Variations include; May You Develop An Incurable and Foul-Smelling Foot Disease; May Your Mother Grow a Third Breast; May You Turn Out To Be The Product Of The Union Between A Cow And A Duck-Billed Platypus.

All very satisfying, but not particularly effective.

2)Taking It Outside

Physical retaliation proceeded by the phrase, "Do you want to take this outside?" Involves bopping offender on the nose or thwacking over the head with suitably heavy bag. Unfortunately, one has to follow up on one's threat, otherwise one is likely to look stupid. This approach might also get you into trouble with The Relevant Authorities. Not for the timid or physically weak.

3)Condescension

Requires the perfection of a supercilious facial expression, aided by raised eyebrow or sneer. Accompanied by devastating putdowns such as, "You Are So Stupid"; "I Don't talk to Morons" or "What a Wally." Can be crushing, but must be implemented with panache and confidence. If you don't have the attitude to pull this one off, don't attempt it.

4)When In Rome

This is the least antagonistic response. Based upon the theory that the more one blends into one's new environment, the less likely one is to arouse the uncongenial attentions of its inhabitants. Requires being as unobtrusive and conformist as possible. Whilst this may appear the least appealing of your options, it will significantly increase your chances of survival. Children do not like children who fail to fit in. In this regard they are similar to adults. May be combined with secret Cursing Under One's Breath if absolute acquiescence proves intolerable.

Susan is being assessed by twenty-seven pairs of eyes. They note the paleness of her skin, the awkwardness of her stance, her over-all Englishness. "Class, this is Susan Owen. Say hello."

"Hellooooo Suuusan."

"Hello." The word catches in her throat.

"You can sit down next to Carl. Carl, move your bag for Susan, please." As she takes her seat, the eyes follow her every movement. The boy next to her stares unashamedly as though she were some sort of freak. She wants to stick her tongue out him, but of course she doesn't.

"Susan," the teacher is smiling alarmingly, "wouldn't you like to tell us about yourself?"

No. "I come from England. I have a twin brother," she wonders if Carl is going to poke her to see if she is real, "and...um..."

"What do your parents do?"

"My dad is a psychologist and my mummy's a lecturer."

She omits to mention that they are divorced or that her father is thousands of miles away.

“That’s very nice. You’re lucky today, Susan. You’re going to learn some South African history. We’re studying the Great Trek.”

The What? She tries to summon up an enthusiastic expression, but The Eyes are still stalking her. She takes out her pencil case and sighs. She knew she should never have got off the aeroplane.

When they arrived in Durban, the heat was so intense it was almost an attack. The airport shimmered ahead of them as they disembarked. Susan’s bag was difficult to carry and she was tired and afraid. The flight itself had seemed a game at first. The seats that leant back when you pushed a button, the meals on little trays, the movie, “Indiana Jones, Mummy! It’s Indiana Jones!” It was a thrilling adventure. But when they landed she was filled with foreboding. As they trekked across the tarmac she wondered what it was she expected. She had thought there might be a chorus of welcoming angels or at the very least, past nannies rushing out with joyous cries of recognition in Shona. No such luck. By the time they made it inside the building, she was covered in a fine film of sweat. Disgusting. She lifted her arms up and flapped, accidentally on purpose swiping Sam across the nose. He swiped back and then they were fighting with renewed energy. “Gerooff!” “Stopit!”

“TWINS!” They cringed. “Sit down.” Their mother pointed to a row of orange plastic chairs set up against a far wall. “Wait there while I queue. And behave yourselves!” Sullenly they dragged themselves over, muttering at each other. “You started it.” “Did not.” She sat down with a thunk and stared at the floor in front of her. A few metres away from them stood a woman and her daughter. South African.

“Mom,” said the girl, “is Dad fetching us?”

“Ja.”

Ja. Mom. Fietchin. The words splintered as they reached her ears. They sounded wrong. It was too much to bear. She got up and ran to Imogen who had reached the front of the arrivals queue.

“Mummy. I want to go home. I don’t like it here.” She sniffed. “People talk funny.” Her mother’s face was exhausted, stretched around the corners. She spoke quietly,

“Sit down, Susie. It’s all right. I’ll be with you as soon as I can.”

“Madam?” The airport official had a mottled complexion and a moustache. The accent was hard and unfamiliar. “How are you coming into the country?”

“Returning home to stay.”

He took a cursory glance at their passports. “Do you have permission from internal affairs?”

“What?” She shook her head, “I didn’t know it was required.”

“You’ll have to wait to one side while I deal with the other passengers.”

She opened her mouth as if to query him, then stepped aside silently. Susan looked at her expression and decided to sit down again. Sam nudged her, “What’s wrong with Mum?” She shrugged, “I dunno.” At least it was cooler than outside where the sun waited. It was for the best that she had said goodbye to the fairies. They would never survive here, the heat would shrivel them to tiny husks, their eyeballs dried out and staring, wings hanging wilted. She tried to picture African fairies. Perhaps they carried spears and rode miniature elephants instead of white horses. Next to her, Sam fidgeted with his bag. “What’s taking so long?” She knew it was partly because of him they left England, so that he could be Helped with his Learning Problem. So that he could get a Proper Education. It seemed all too

easy to hold him accountable. "I hope the lions eat you." But he wasn't listening. He stood up and wandered over to their mother. Tugged on her skirt, "Mummy..." The line had petered out. The few people left in the queue seemed tired but somehow reassured. They knew they were almost home and their faces contained the simple satisfaction of return. She wished she were one of them.

Half an hour later they were finally allowed through to the arrivals lounge. Waiting for them was a handsome old man who looked like an army general. His eyes were sharp blue and his back absolutely straight. He reached out to Imogen and gave her an efficient hug. "Welcome back, dear." Then he bent down to the children and patted each one briefly on the head. "I am your grandfather. It's good to meet you."

"Say hello, twins."

They responded dutifully, "Hello Granddad."

"Long flight?"

"Yes, dreadful. And the wretched man at arrivals saw fit to keep us back. Something to do with Home Affairs."

"You look tired, dear. Let's be going."

He took the trolley from her and Susan watched the two of them walk towards the exit and hot sunshine. If she followed, it would be final. She would never be able to go back to her old life. While she was inside the airport she was still safe, still halfway. She hesitated and Sam poked her with his foot, "Are you coming or what?" She pulled a face at him, "Yes, dummy, I'm coming."

Her grandparents lived in a small town over an hour away from Durban. The

landscape changed as they drove, tropical vegetation was replaced by farmland and green hills. She didn't see it. She and Sam fell asleep with their heads on the suitcases. Every so often she woke up to the voices of her mother and grandfather and was unpleasantly disorientated, the sun causing her to scrunch her eyes up. By the time they pulled into the well-treed suburb of their new home she was developing a painful crick in her neck. She shoved Sam awake. He possessed the enviable talent of being able to sleep through anything and sometimes she despised him for it. His ability to nap peacefully through a crisis was just so unfair.

"This is it."

The house was a bungalow in a large garden. All the windows had bars across them. She would learn that these were for keeping a few people In, and a lot of people Out. She eyed them suspiciously; it didn't look like the kind of place that could contain any fairies. Their grandmother was waiting for them on the veranda. She had the biggest bottom the twins had ever seen. They gawped.

"Imogen, dear. You must be tired after your trip. And these must be the children. How lovely."

Granny's ample posterior was the consequence of her general immobility. She spent a lot of time on her bed, pills lined up regimentally on her bedside table and issued loud instructions. Sometimes she got up to lean out of her window and call to Granddad who was always either in his garage or the vegetable garden. "EEEDDDWWAARRD", she shouted, "EEEDDD!" The disgruntled stomp of Wellingtons could be heard in the near distance.

"Coming dear, coming."

Inside, the house had a distinctive Grandparent scent, like mothballs, and the light was muted. Most of the furniture was antique and did not encourage

Lounging About, everything was arranged with neat precision, the Persian rugs positioned at right angles to heavy chairs of dark wood. Susan followed her grandmother's swaying bottom down a long passage, "This will be your room, dear." There was a bed, a large desk, a chest of drawers and an immense cupboard looming in one corner. It had a completely different feel to her room in England; as if it were a space she was only borrowing and would never be entirely comfortable in. The white walls stared at her blankly. She put her suitcase down, sat on the edge of the bed, and sighed.

At break time she goes in search of Sam. He was put in a different class and she is now desperate to find him. She acquires a small following.

"Does it always rain in England?"

"Why are you so white? You look like a ghost."

"They don't get any sun in England. That's why she's like that."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm looking for my brother."

Suddenly she spots him. He is hovering on the edge of a group of children, his paleness setting him apart. His knees jut at bony angles above his socks. She has never been so glad to see him.

"Sam! I'm over here!" He doesn't hear her.

"You Poms talk funny." The speaker is tall and gangling with a mop of brown hair. He feigns a snooty expression,

"Ah say, jolly good show, what?" There is laughter. She calls louder,

"Sam!"

"Rather, old Bean. Poms must stick together. We love the dear old Queen and dear old Pommyland, what, what, Ah say." The other children are now almost hysterical. A few of them pick up the refrain,

“PommmeeeePommmeeeePommmeeee.”

Susan takes a deep breath and points her finger. *Feel my fury.* “I do NOT sound like that! Anyway I’d rather be a Pom because you are Evil! In England we know that South Africans are Evil! You put Nelson Mandela in jail and you have Oppression and you are all Evil! You will all GO TO HELL!” They stare at her. She runs over to her twin and takes his hand. “I want to go home.”

The rest of the day passes very slowly. She has not endeared herself. Carl glares at her and when she sits down he whispers, “You Poms think you own everything! You’ll go to Hell, not us!” She knows that this is impossible. She cannot go to Hell because she loves Nelson Mandela. A week after they arrived, they went to an old friend of their mother’s to watch his release on television. There had been a braai in a beautiful garden, the men standing round it drinking Castle Lager. Occasionally one would prod the meat and grunt, “Boerie’s almost done.” The women stayed mostly in the kitchen, leaning on the counters with their arms folded. Apartheid for the sexes. “Pete thinks we should emigrate to New Zealand.” There was an atmosphere of nervous expectancy that was almost fear but she and Sam were unable to contain their excitement. They skipped and linked arms, danced on the lawn. “Nelson Mandela’s freeee! Nelson Mandela’s freeee!”

The men shook their heads. “Kids don’t know any better.”

“Ja, it’s tickets now. ‘Specially if you’ve got a white skin.”

One of them nodded in the direction of the still dancing children.

“And you don’t get much whiter than that.”

At 2 o’ clock, their mother arrives to fetch them. Susan’s teacher comes

outside to speak to her. The twins sit in the car while they talk. Sam leans forward and picks the leather where it is coming away from the seat.

"They're talking about you, y'know."

"I know."

Imogen gets in and turns the engine on. "Oh dear, twins. Was it really that bad?"

"They were horrible, Mum."

"But you told them to go to hell, Susie."

"I didn't. I told them they would go to Hell. Besides, they called me a Pom."

"Well perhaps they deserved it. Still, I know its difficult, darling, but you must try a bit harder to get along. When someone teases you it's better not to react. You're just giving them what they want."

They are passing the centre of town, which is a post office and a couple of shops. It has a dusty, cluttered feel and despite it's size, the pavements are alive with activity. There are people shouting to each other from street corners, clustered under trees in chatting groups, the sweat gleaming on their skins. They are almost entirely black. She is unused to so many dark faces. In England there was one black boy at their school, Samuel Ochanix. His parents were from West Africa and his skin had an almost purple glint to it, his teeth shining white when he smiled. She does not remember his colour causing him to be treated any differently. There are no black kids at her new one. They are not allowed. She sees them walking home in the uniform worn by all children attending African schools. They are loud and unruly looking and they make her nervous. They seem so knowing and she so ignorant in her bottle-green dress in the back of her grandfather's ^{ancient} ~~battered~~ BMW. As the car travels along the road, Susan watches the steady stream of walking Africans; women balancing bundles on their heads, men in battered blue

overalls, their feet pounding the same slow and thoughtful pace. In England she and her mother and brother had also walked, to the shops, to school, to church; because they had been too poor to afford a car. When it rained, the holes in Imogen's shoes leaked water, which made her socks wet, and gave her blisters. But white people here nearly always drive and Susan has yet to see one trudging along among the throngs of black bodies. Perhaps they feel safer in cars. It is so hot her legs are sticking to the seat. She winds her window down and rests her head on the door.

"I hate it here, Mummy. They don't even have movies here. Please can we go home?"

"I'm sorry, darling, but we can't. This is home. You have to try and be brave. Okay?"

They drive past a golf course and the local mental institution. She wonders what it must be like to go mad. What would they do if she stood up in the middle of the classroom and jumped up and down making chicken noises? Or if she just screamed and screamed and screamed? She imagines the stunned expression on Carl's face as she dumps the contents of her lunchbox on his head, eyes rolling wildly.

"Susie?"

"Okay."

"Good girl."

They have reached the house and Sam gets out to open the gate. Her mother turns to her.

"Remember this is even harder for your brother than it is for you."

"Yes."

"Susie..."

"Yes, I know. I know!" She jumps out of the car and runs inside.

“Susan!” Granny’s voice is sharp. “Don’t hurtle around indoors like that!”

“Sorry.”

“How was your first day?”

“Fine, thank you.”

“Good. Now go and get changed. And don’t forget to fold your clothes properly.”

“Yes, Granny.”

Her grandparents are fond of Rules and Regulations. There are signs up all over the house stating the expected standards of behaviour. On Susan’s door is one of blue cardboard inscribed with her grandmother’s neat handwriting.

Susan Will Not:

Put her knickers and socks in the same drawer.

Leave a mess on her floor.

Leave her bed unmade.

Leave dirty mugs in her room.

Susan Will:

Put her dirty clothes in the laundry basket.

Keep her room neat and tidy.

Make her bed.

Be fined 20c of her pocket money for every transgression.

She changes quickly into shorts and a t-shirt. It is a pleasure to take her school shoes off, the air a relief against her sticky skin. She will go outside into the garden to confide in the ants. She has a favourite spot under a small cherry blossom tree where she likes to sit and watch them crawl busily over her toes, their antennae quivering. They are very good listeners, better than

the fairies, because they don't talk back and they don't pinch, although occasionally one may climb her leg a little too far. When she is out there in the quiet of early evening, watching the sun sink as the insects around her chirrup, she experiences a contentment she had not expected. There is something warm and tingling that floats in the air. Things feel alive with possibility. She can lie back and look at the great expanse of sky above her, slowly fading from blue to oranges and purples and finally to a star-pricked black. She stares up at the distant points of light and wonders if someone on a far-flung planet is staring back. In England the stars were often obscured by cloud, the sky low-slung and miserly, full of the threat of rain. The dustbins and alleys appear small and mean beside the brilliance of these African evenings. She is about to go outside when there is a knock on her door.

"Susie?"

"Come in, Mum."

She is carrying a pile of old photograph albums. "Sit with me on the bed, won't you? I was looking through these earlier today and I thought you might be interested." It is an obvious Cheering Up Tactic, but she decides to indulge her.

"What are they?"

They're photos from when your grandparents were young. And from when I was young too." There is one of Grandad in an army uniform. The peaked cap he is wearing is too large for his head and shadows half his face, but his smile is broad and slightly uneven. Susan examines it carefully. He is so young, so *friendly-looking*. "I can't believe that's *Grandad*."

"Oh yes, he was in the Second World War. I know he's strict, Susie, but he's also a brave man."

Other pictures show groups of people on picnics in rocky landscapes, large houses with open verandas, children jumping into dams, their arms flung open.

"Are these from Rhodesia?"

"Zimbabwe."

"Well it was Rhodesia then, wasn't it?"

She has often heard her grandparents talk about this fabled place. It is their favourite topic. When We Were In Rhodesia. They make it sound like an African Camelot, golden and glittering, certainly too perfect to exist for long. She knows that they left reluctantly and bitterly. Something about Those Bloody British Selling Us Down The River. Her mother talks about it differently. She is always careful to call it Zimbabwe, a word her grandparents never use.

But her eyes have seized upon another photograph. A slim teenage girl squints into the camera, right hand shielding her eyes. Her blonde hair flips neatly up at the shoulders. Next to her is a young man in an old-fashioned lifeguard suit. They are standing on a beach.

"Who's this, Mummy?"

Imogen smiles softly. "That is Adam. He was my first real love."

"Your what?" She does not like to think that her mother could ever have been in love with anyone other than her father. It is too alarming, too threatening to her own existence. She contemplates the image with a hostile glare.

"He looks silly in that costume."

"Oh no, he was lovely. Too beautiful, really. It was the summer of 1967 and I had just turned sixteen..."

Susan is sceptical. Sixteen? Her mother? Never. Despite herself, she is

curious. It seems so unlikely that the girl in the photo can be the same person as the woman sitting next to her. She prods her with an inquiring finger.

“So what happened?”

Pop Quiz : Are You An Adolescent?

In Family Photos You Are

- a) *Beaming*
- b) *Posing*
- c) *Scowling*

Your Favourite Past Time Is

- a) *Throwing your food*
- b) *Throwing a ball*
- c) *Throwing insults*

You Are Often To Be Found

- a) *Drooling onto your bib*
- b) *Tormenting small animals*
- c) *Imagining your funeral*

The Bathroom Is For

- a) *Who cares? Nappies are all you use.*
- b) *Making smells*
- c) *Perfecting your appearance.*

Your Most Highly Esteemed Writer Is

- a) *Who cares? You can't read.*

b) Dr Zeus

c) Edgar Allan Poe

Your Parents Are

a) A source of food

b) A source of food and money

c) A source of food, money and embarrassment

If You Answered Mostly A's;

You are either under the age of three or over the age of ninety. Well done.

Life does not get much better or more carefree than this.

Mostly B's

You are between the ages of four and twelve. At this stage of your life you are still relatively tolerable. Don't get too comfortable. The ghastly future awaits.

Mostly C's

This is adolescence. Welcome to hell.

DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA, 1967

(1)

Imogen's skin is turning pink around the edges of her bikini. She can feel its tender rub every time she shifts. It's a pleasant sensation. It reminds her of how little she is wearing. She turns over onto her stomach and buries her

fingers into the sand, scooping up handfuls. This morning she left her parent's holiday flat in a one-piece enormous enough for their approval. Her father gave her body a disapproving look and sent her out with reluctance. "Be careful, my girl. And be home by four."

All the way to the beach she felt encased in rubber, she itched. In the changing rooms she reached into the bottom of her bag for the tiny costume squashed between Donne and D.H. Lawrence. It glistened blue in the dark, a bright bold flash. She slid it on over her skin and walked outside into the sun, sixteen and supersexy. The knowledge infected her step and made her hips swing. She became one of those women on the cinema screen who drip glamour with a toss of their hair, who glide indifferent to the stares that follow them. She lies on her towel, back burning, feet in the air. The texture of the sand absorbs her, its heat travelling along the lines of her arms and across her body. It makes her sleepy.

"Nice day, hey?"

She looks up with a start at a pair of tanned calves. They are taut with muscle and covered in a fine layer of golden hairs. Male. Imogen cranes her neck upwards and squints. The swing and the sex has morphed into a fear that pulses at the back of her throat. She gulps.

"Pardon?" The boy squats next to her. His eyes are a dark brown, like chocolate. "It's a nice day, don't you think?"

"Um. Yes."

He reaches out a warm hand, "My name's Adam. I'm a lifeguard. S'why I'm wearing red."

"I'm Imogen. I'm here on holiday from Rhodesia. With my parents." As she stretches to meet his hand with her own, the bikini slides a little from her breast. She feels it even as she watches his glance slip down to her chest. He

looks up quickly and they both turn away, cheeks flushed.

"Sorry."

"No, it's..."

"I'd better get back to the tower. You know...just in case."

She sits up. "Okay." Searches for the words. "It was...nice to meet you."

His smile crinkles, "I'll see you tomorrow maybe?"

"Yes. Maybe."

Imogen's parents are originally South African. She and her sister were born there. But no one who can claim Rhodesian citizenship wants to be anything but Rhodesian. "The best country in the world," says her father.

"They treat their blacks appallingly in South Africa. Terrible. It's those Afrikaner Nats, you know. No sense of morality."

Her mother squints at her over reading glasses. "Just be grateful you're Rhodesian."

Even the best country in the world is not without its weaknesses. Rhodesia is landlocked but South Africa has coastline, thousands of miles of beach and sea. Every summer holiday the family makes the trek down to Natal and the tropical heat of Durban in December. It is a city of chrome colours, the pinks and purples of the American ice cream parlours she has seen in the movies, palm trees and Marilyn Munroe's full-lipped pout. The kids on the beaches are tanned and blonde and have shiny smiles like a Beach Boy's song. It could be California except that it isn't; Africa thumps underneath its gleam. Imogen walks back to the flat past vendors selling boerie rolls and icicles. "20 cents for a strawberry ice, madam?" They are barred from the beaches by signs stating Slegs Blankes. Whites Only, and offer her worn grins as they shuffle towards her. "Madam? Please Madam?" She shakes her head.

"No. No. No thank you." The image of The Boy is so bright she is blind to almost everything else. She keeps having to blink the world back into focus. She takes out a cigarette and lights it with practised finesse, inhaling carefully. She has been smoking for a few months now, taking her first drag in the school toilets. "Come on Gen, have a fag." She has to hide them from her parents in cunning little corners and keeps peppermints in her bag to mask the smoke on her breath. Despite these precautions, she thinks they have suspicions. Her father is not the most feared headmaster in Salisbury for nothing. 'Awful Anthony' is the name whispered in classrooms when he is safely out of earshot. "I have a sixth sense for Trouble. I KNOW when children are lying to me. I KNOW *you* are lying to me." The offender would gulp and avert their eyes and confess. "Yes, yes, I did it. It was me." He has a nose like an eagle's beak; sharp and predatory. Sometimes she is afraid of him. When she was younger, she was his daughter. Hannah was their mother's favourite; six years older and prettily perfect. But Imogen had always preferred Dad's company. He used to take her fishing with him and they sat and watched the water and were comfortably silent together. If she caught a fish he opened its gullet with an efficient slice of his pocketknife. Quick and clean and direct, like everything else he did. She followed him around whenever she could, a small childish shadow of adoration. She sighs at the memory and finishes her cigarette before stubbing it out with her slops. Almost home.

"You're back early." Her mother's voice registers surprise, "It's only just after one."

"Margaret, is that Imogen?"

"Yes, Dad. It's me." They sound disappointed enough for her to wonder

whether she has interrupted some depraved activity. Perhaps all the book reading is merely a front for wild bouts of fornication. Yuk. Then she remembers her mother's shoes as dismisses the idea as impossible. She has never seen her bare feet, even in the hottest months of a long summer they are sturdily fortified by leather. She was probably born sensibly shod, an expression of Victorian correctness upon her infant face, "It's a baby girl, Mrs Talbot...and she's wearing lace-ups!" She giggles as her father emerges with a rumpled look, spectacles teetering on his high forehead. He has been napping, the folds of sleep making his face appear vulnerable where usually it is stern. "Time for some tea, I think. Are you feeling well, my girl? Didn't expect you ~~home~~ for at least another hour or two."

"I'm fine. It was just getting too...too hot, so I thought I'd come home."

"Tea, dear?"

"No thank you. Might I go and lie down in my room for a bit?"

Margaret peers at her, "Are you sure you're all right? You seem a bit flustered."

"I'm fine. It's just the humidity."

"All right then, but don't sleep for too long."

Her room is warm and stuffy. The curtains have been drawn against the sun. Her memories of her parents will always be pervaded by this dimness. A light that is neither quite day nor night, but inhabits a space halfway between. The light of afternoon naps and milky cups of Rooibos. She gets onto her bed and replays her conversation with The Boy in her mind. His name is Adam. He is beautiful. My bikini slipped. He looked at my boobs. HE LOOKED AT MY BOOBS! She buries her head in the pillow with a groan. It is embarrassment accompanied by a weird sense of power; he

looked at me. I am worth looking at. More and more she has become aware of this, of her body and of the attention it attracts. It arouses mixed feelings. She turns onto her back and sticks up a leg. "It is a good leg," she thinks, "I would like this leg if I were a man." She runs her hands along her neck and stomach and is suddenly ashamed. "I am disgusting for thinking these things. Men are Disgusting. Men are Only After One Thing." She isn't sure if she has the Thing or not, but she suspects that it is lurking Somewhere Down Below. She imagines it as slippery and stealthy- looking. Sneaking up on you when you are least expecting it. There you are, innocently sunbathing, enjoying yourself in an unobtrusive way when BAM! The Thing springs at you. "Nonono!" I am not like that. I am an Intellectual!" She gets off her bed and picks a copy of Great Expectations from the bookcase. Nothing like a bit of Dickens to subdue The Thing. *My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, (he had eyes like chocolate) my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. (I felt so strange) So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.* (Bugger, this isn't going to work) Perhaps Hannah would be able to help her, but she's thousands of miles away studying law in Cape Town. She is a sophisticated twenty-two and will always be the over-achieving older sister. Why can't you be more like Hannah? Hannah's been made a prefect. Hannah's IQ tested in the top 2% of the country. HannahHannahblahblahblah. She used to bring boyfriends home and they would sit on the sofa holding hands with soft decorum. Eleven year old Imogen thought them ridiculous and hid behind the sofa's back. At the critical moment, when the endearments simply became too nauseating, she leapt out with a wild yell, "YABBAYABBAYABBA!!SMOOCHESMOOCHEE!!"

"Oh God, Imogen! Go away! Leave us alone!" The boyfriend would jump guiltily, no matter how polite his hand holding, "She's just a kid, Han. I don't mind."

"I am not a kid, I am a child and I know what you want! I have a sixth sense for trouble!"

At this point her sister shooed her out forcibly, both hands on her back. "Get out!"

"But you know boys only want one thing!"

"Oh God. Shut-up!"

She wasn't sure Hannah felt anything as untidy as passion anyway, it wouldn't go well with her twinsets. The six years between them is a formidable gap; she hardly knows her. In some ways she grew up alone, siblingless. She invented squadrons of imaginary friends to compensate; they had names only she knew how to pronounce, in a language she had invented. You couldn't say them out loud, because they were sacred. You had to whisper them under your breath, with the appropriate reverence. She used to see them in the long passageways of their house, sometimes taking up all the space so that she couldn't get past. "You can't be here, Mummy and Daddy will see you!" The phantom friend would blink and vanish with a reproachful puff, leaving her alone in the empty corridor.

(2)

The next day, she takes the bus to the beach. She loves early mornings in the summer; the promise of heat is tightly packed in the air, beads of perspiration are already beginning to form along her collarbone and in the small of her back. She stands in her light cotton dress, shifting from foot to

foot impatiently. The only other person in the queue is an elderly woman with an umbrella. They do not speak. She is desperate for a cigarette, but dares not light up so close to the parental abode. Her father could smell tobacco from a mile away, in a concrete bunker twenty feet below the ground, with a peg pinning his nostrils together. After another five minutes of impetuous hopping, the bus rounds the corner and creaks grudgingly to a halt. She gets in, pays and heads for the back. Her hands are shaking as she lights up, she has been unable to erase The Boy from her mind and the prospect of seeing him again fills her with a delightful terror. She is still not certain how to handle boys. When they lived in Gweru she had been best friends with a trio of brothers. Jason, Peter and Sam. Their parents were teachers at the same school. She and Sam were the youngest, always scrambling after the other two, forever falling into trouble. The boys were all daring adventurers, and consummate liars. Their next-door neighbour grew the most beautiful mealies in town and guarded them with corresponding ferocity. The children had tried and failed to steal some of the maize, invariably incurring personal injury and the ire of the neighbour and their parents. It was Jason's idea to retaliate against Mr Watson, "It's selfish of him not to share them. He's got so many." They came up with an elaborate scheme that would shame him in front of the entire neighbourhood. The boys borrowed a can of paint from their father's garage and under cover of evening dusk, the children snuck out to avenge themselves.

The next morning, Imogen was woken by her father.

"Get up, my girl. I want to take you somewhere." She dressed and washed with trembling hands. He escorted her to the car and drove her to the scene of the crime without speaking. The silence was unbearable. In the few short minutes it took them to arrive, her teeth had begun to chatter. The old man

was standing outside his house, waving his walking stick, moustache bristling. He was short, but his voice was loud. "Bloody kids defacing my property! I should take you to court for this!"

"I don't think such extreme measures are necessary. The boys will be punished, I can assure you." Mr Heyns spoke with restraint. Behind him the wall was adorned with green, "*Mr Watson is a Convent-Girl.*" His sons were lined up in front of it, oldest to youngest, looking unrepentant.

"Get out, Imogen." Her father's voice was soft. She did as she was told and went to stand next to Sam. The two men conversed quietly while their children sweated. Sam whispered to her, "Don't confess to anything! They haven't got any proof we did it."

"Jason,"

"Yes, Sir?"

"Do you know who is responsible for this?"

The boy looked his father calmly in the eye.

"No, Sir."

"Peter. Do you know? Can you tell me why a tin of green paint is missing from my garage?"

"No, Sir."

"Sam?"

The boy drew himself up to his full 4 foot eight inches. "No, Sir!"

The men exchanged glances and then her father turned to her. She swallowed nervously. They knew she was the weak link. He bent down to her and put his hand under her chin.

"Imogen..."

"Yes, Daddy?"

"Do you know what happened?"

Don't confess Don't confess!

"Um..." She could feel the boys straining next to her, desperate to clamp their hands over her obedient mouth.

"Imogen. Don't lie to me." That was it, she was done for.

"Yes we did it me an' Jason an' Peter an' Sam. We did it last night and we took the paint and it was Jason's idea and yes we did it!"

There was series of disgusted sounds to her left and she sensed the word drop into the air around her. *Traitor.*

"Good girl."

After receiving hefty wallops to their backsides, they were made to scrub the writing off. The boys did not speak to her once.

"Do you smell something funny?"

"Ja, it's stinky like rotten eggs."

"Must be *Her.*"

"Well, it's not any of us."

"I am not stinky!"

"Did you hear something?"

"Ja, sounded like a rat squeaking."

She was banned from seeing them for a week, but it made little difference- they were ignoring her anyway. She longed to be reaccepted, imagined them whizzing through the neighbourhood on their bikes without her. She sat on her bed and pined.

"I don't see why you're so upset. They're just silly boys." Hannah was fourteen and Very Grown-Up.

"They're not silly. They're my friends."

"Suit yourself."

She knew she was going to have to do something Spectacular to redeem herself, a feat of Great Daring and Bravery. She struggled to think of a way to prove her worthiness until she overheard her parents discussing Peter's latest escapade.

"Apparently he heard about an abandoned eagle's nest somewhere near the MacGregor place. Close to the dam. He wants to rescue it for his room."

"It'll be impossible to get. Probably perched high in a tree."

"Bert has forbidden him to try it. But you know those boys, they can be difficult to reason with."

Imogen knew how much Peter loved birds and all the animals of the bush. She knew how much it would mean to him to have the nest. It was not something she expected The Adults to understand. She would find it, and bring it back to him and they would all love her again. She wasn't the sort of child to be actively brave, had always preferred to read about things rather than do them, but she was desperate, and Desperate Times required Desperate Measures.

She rose early the next day. The MacGregor's lived a few miles away and she didn't want to cycle under a blistering sun. Her father was already awake.

"Where are you off too?"

She heaved her bicycle towards the door, "I want to go for a ride before it gets too hot."

"Have you had any breakfast?"

"No, I won't be long."

He gave her a Dubious Look over the rim of his coffee mug. "All right, but be back soon. And don't do anything stupid, my girl. You're still being

gated for your last fiasco.”

She nodded in what she hoped was a suitably humble and deferential manner.

“Yes, Dad.”

The morning was already wicked with future heat, it sizzled along the ground behind her as she rode. The roads to the farm were mostly dirt, and her bicycle bumped and bucked over the stones, its wheels spinning through dust clouds, which caused her to sneeze hugely.

“Wha...wha...whachu!” The bicycle wobbled perilously with each sneeze and she had to fight to keep it upright. She knew she was nearing the farm when she began to pass fields full of munching cows. Occasionally one would look up with a curious Moo; *Where is this child going in such a hurry?* But on the whole they were oblivious to her furious pedalling and sneezing. It was with some relief that she arrived at the first gate to the farm. She got off the bike and leant it against the fence. Carefully studied the sign on the gate: **Trespassers Will be Shot Before They Are Prosecuted.** She wasn’t entirely sure what *prosecuted* meant, but she supposed that it might not be much fun to be shot. Still, they had swum many times in the MacGregor’s dam, and with permission, too. She decided to risk it. Desperate Times. She hauled herself over the gate and set off in the direction of the dam. At least she *thought* it was in the direction of the dam. As the day wore on and it grew hotter and hotter, she began to have her doubts. She seemed to be going in circles and was beginning to tire. As she walked, she passed for what felt like the third or fourth time a cluster of acacia trees with some large rocks at their base. It looked like the perfect place for a rest. One of the rocks was at an angle that allowed her crawl underneath where it was cool and shady. She lay there curled with her knees to her chin, watching the

grass shimmer and thinking that she might be in A Spot of Bother, when there was a squeaking sound from behind her. She manoeuvred carefully so as not to startle whatever it was, although her nerves were screaming with alarm. A small dassie moved next to her left leg. It was looking at her curiously, almost thoughtfully. Imogen exhaled with relief; nothing to be afraid of.

"Hello," she said. "Do you live here?"

The rock rabbit gave an assenting squeak. Then it hopped forward and bit her hard on the ankle.

What happened next remained a blur. She remembered shrieking with pain and alarm. Banging her head on the rock as she tried to spring up. Further pain and alarm. Running. Hopping. Running. Somehow managing to find her bicycle. Clambering over the gate. Cycling a few yards. Passing out. When she woke in the hospital, her parents were sitting by her bed.

"She's come to. Call the doctor, Ed."

Her mother peered down at her. "You have been a very silly girl, Imogen Anthony. You are lucky Mr MacGregor found you and you're alive." She stroked her daughter's forehead, "You had better never scare me like that again."

When she was back home and they were allowed to visit, the three of them each brought her one of his most precious possessions. Jason a smooth stone hollowed out in the middle, Peter a snakeskin and Sam a shell he had collected on a trip to Mozambique. She could tell from the way they gathered awe-struck around her bedside that she still had the mystical aura of Near Death about her. It was very satisfying.

"You were bitten by a dassie."

"I know."

"It had rabies."

"I know"

"You had to have nine injections in your stomach." Sam shook his head in wonderment, "*Nine.*"

"I wanted to get the eagle's nest for you, Pete."

"Really?" His eyes dropped to the floor.

"Let's make A Pact." Jason spoke with the assurance of one who was used to being the eldest and giving orders, "We'll make a pact never to argue again, and to always be together till Death Us Do Part."

The others nodded eagerly. "Gen? Will you join?" She hesitated briefly, if only to prolong the remorse on their faces.

"Yes. I'll join."

"Excellent. Put your hands to your hearts everyone, and repeat after me; I hereby do solemnly swear...

"I hereby do solemnly swear..."

"Never to argue with my brethren brothers or sister and to always be together till Death Us Do Part."

The younger children chorused obediently after him. The room was suddenly quiet with the weight of their words; they had made a Forever After Oath. One which could never be taken back.

"P'raps we should slit our palms and mingle blood like the Red Indians do!" Sam beamed at the brilliance of his suggestion.

"Now, now. That's enough." She was relieved to see her father standing in the doorway. "I don't want any talk of gratuitous blood-letting in this household."

The boys blinked at the unfamiliar word.

"Imogen needs her rest. Besides, she's being gated for a further two weeks for disobeying my orders. So you lot had better be off."

"Yes, Sir." Jason gave her a salute. "Farewell, Brethren Sister. We will meet again soon."

"Farewell."

"Farewell."

"Goodbye." She felt a rush of happiness saturate her entire body. They loved her again.

But that was years ago. It hasn't been the same since she was fourteen and Sam slapped her back one day and felt the bra beneath her T-shirt. They became awkward after that, couldn't even look her in the eye. She had insisted upon the bra because she was the only girl in her form that didn't have one. In the changing rooms she undressed shamefully, her flat chest covered by one of the thin little vests her mother bought her. The other girls had proper breasts which jiggled as they moved or gestured. They all wore bras. Imogen would fold her arms across her body and feel painfully inadequate. When the humiliation became too much to bear, she demanded to be fitted with one.

"But dear," her mother seemed barely able to restrain her amusement, "you don't need it."

"Yes, I do! I'm the only one at school who hasn't got one yet!" She stuck her skinny chest out, "See? I do need it."

"Very well."

The following day she took her to the fitter's where she was measured and prodded and assessed. After some tut-tutting, the woman disappeared into

the back of the shop and emerged a short while later. "This is the smallest size we stock. Let me put it on for you."

"That's all right," she didn't want her nakedness exposed. "I can do it myself."

The fitter hesitated. "You can try it out in the changing room behind you. If you need any assistance, just call."

"Thank you, but I'm sure I'll manage."

She could sense her mother's imminent laughter as she stalked away. The cubicle was small and bare and harshly lit. She took off her top and held the bra up, *did it go on this way or that way?* It took her a few minutes of battling with the clasp before she had it on properly. She looked in the mirror with dismay. It hung sadly on her chest like a pair of deflated balloons.

"Imogen?" Her mother's loud and penetrating voice caused her to cringe.

"Are you finished in there?"

"No, I'm not quite..."

"Let me see." The curtain was whipped back with matriarchal authority.

There was a short silence. "Oh dear."

The fitter coughed politely, "Mrs Anthony, it seems to me that your daughter really doesn't require a bra. She has hardly any breasts whatsoever."

At this point Margaret collapsed into giggles. "I know," she wheezed, "but she insists...she insists."

Imogen scowled, "I'll grow into it."

She kept the bra and soon filled it so well she had to buy a larger size, but her friendship with the boys dwindled. She had become different to them. She'd become A Girl. With the bra came the other attendants of growing up. She began to attract the interest of the Opposite Sex, which unnerved her.

She had a reputation for primness and knew that she was called Imogen the Impenetrable behind her back. At the party of a friend she overheard a conversation about her; boys standing with their ties loosened and top shirts buttons undone. With beers in hand they affected a lazy, ruffled look. They didn't know she could hear them because she was stealthily concealed by a large pot plant as they named girls according to sexual availability.

"Debbie Aitkins."

"Great for a blow job, but ugly as sin."

"Imogen Anthony."

"More uptight than a fucking nun."

"Got more chance of fucking a nun."

"Shut-up Collier. What a fucking stupid thing to say." Matthew Shepard took a drag of his cigarette, "She's got headmaster's daughter's syndrome that's all. H.D.S. It's well documented as having an adverse affect on the libido. With a dad like hers you'd be uptight too. She just needs someone more sophisticated than you arseholes."

There were guffaws. "And that would be you, Shepard?"

"Jesus Christ! Would you shut-the-fuck-up?" He wiped a finger over his lips. "Yes, that would be me."

Imogen's lips are dry and she wets them with the tip of her tongue. They are nearing the beach now. Shop fronts and hotels have replaced well-watered lawns. She drops her cigarette butt out of the window and thinks about what she is going to say to Adam. She practised different poses in front of the mirror last night. Receptive? *Hi, it's so good to see you again.* Too enthusiastic. Cool? *Hello, fancy bumping into you.* Not enthusiastic enough. God, what a nightmare. She wishes Hazel were with her. They met last year

after her parents transferred her to an all-girls boarding school in the hope that her awkward bits would be smoothed out by afternoon prep and energetic bouts of hockey. Some chance. She bunks prep and because she's too vain to wear her glasses she can barely see the hockey ball let alone do anything with it. The environment of the Rhodesian schoolgirl is a rarefied one, it maintains hierarchy through systematic applications of threat, punishment and forceful good cheer. A lot like a *Mallory Towers* for the colonies. "*I say, Betty, isn't life jolly?*" "*Yes it is, by George. I'm so thrilled to be English and to own a hockey stick.*" But this isn't England. Underneath the uniforms and school hats, the African sun is fermenting teenage rebellion. The day after she arrived, a large girl with a cockney accent cornered her.

" 'Ere, you aint going to survive long in this place if you aint wif someone oo knows wot's wot." Hazel's father was a Londoner from the East End who had acquired his wealth dubiously. She had enjoyed an eclectic upbringing. "Pardon?" Imogen squished her hat down further on her head and looked for an escape route. The other girl took her hand and shook it vigorously, "I'm 'Azel."

" 'Azel?"

"Yeah. Stick wif me and you'll be awright."

That afternoon they had hockey practice. Imogen stood with her bottle green skirt flapping at her skinny knees, squinting desperately into the sun, palms sweating. Praying,

Don't let the ball come this way, don't let the ball come this way.

It arrived at her feet before she could run in the opposite direction. She looked at it. It looked back at her. "Come on you drip," it said with a malicious grin, "hit me. Or are you afraid you'll bungle it, as you always

do?"

"Bugger you." She focussed, took aim, lifted her stick for a mighty swipe...and missed completely. There were sniggers from behind her.

"Not very good are you? Perhaps you should try to *hit* the ball next time." Julia Myers. Dimpled, athletic, little sympathy for the uncoordinated. She blushed. "Sorry."

"Don't bother. You're helping my team win." From a few metres away Hazel watched with interest.

Julia Myers is flying down the wing, blonde ponytail flashing. Look at those ball-skills, the deftness of the dribbling, the swiftness of the feet. What a shining specimen of sporting ability. There is an aura of invincibility to her. She dodges tackles with practised ease, one defender after another is foiled. But what is this? Someone is galumphing towards her.

"YYYAAARRRGGGHHH!! GETOUTAMYWAY!!" Girls scatter like trembling hordes before the wrath of Attila the Hun. Is there hope for shining Julia? Will she prevail? Thwack! Smack! Wallop! The dust clears and she is on the ground. Hazel has the ball.

Across the field, Imogen couldn't help but smile. "I like this girl," she thought.

It was Hazel who introduced her cigarettes. They sat on a toilet seat in the fourth form lavatories while the rest of the school was in assembly and pondered the small tube of tobacco in her hand.

"Can I light it, then?"

"I don't know. What if someone catches us?"

The other girl sniffed scornfully, "So? They'll just expel us. I been expelled

before and it aint nuffink to worry about.”

Imogen imagined the expressions on her parent’s faces.

“I’m not so sure.”

“Well I’m havin’ one.” She lit up the cigarette, took a drag and exhaled with deep satisfaction. “Ahhh. Luvley.” Gave her a sneaky glance,

“Come on, Gen. Have a fag.”

Several possible outcomes whipped through Imogen's mind;

Scenario 1: She chooses not to accept. She says No. She sits on the loo and watches Hazel smoke the entire ciggie without taking so much as a single puff.

Scenario 2: She accepts. As she takes her first drag, Miss Krog the maths teacher bursts in upon them and accuses them of a) breaking the no-smoking rule b) trying to burn the school down c) some sort of weird illicit lesbianism (for why else would two girls hide out in the toilets?), in which case, she is likely to ask to join them.

Scenario 3: She accepts. As she inhales nothing happens except that she gains a lifelong addiction and the acceptance of her peers.

“I’m an optimist,” she thought, “I’ll settle for the third option.”

She took the cigarette. Examined it. Put it to her mouth and inhaled with gusto. Phwoaaaar! Her lungs were on fire! Wheezing, she wiped a tear from her eye.

“Bloody hell. That is luvley.”

Adam is lovely too. He is walking towards her across the sand. At least she *thinks* it is him. She isn’t wearing her specs and at this distance it is hard to

tell. She buries her nose in her book and pretends to read avidly.

"Hello."

She looks up with an air of practised nonchalance.

"Oh. Hello."

He smiles shyly.

"What are you reading?"

"Nothing really. Just some philosophy." Her mouth is dry.

"Oh."

They look at the sea.

"Quite choppy today, isn't it?"

Suddenly he becomes animated. "Ja, the swell scan get quite strong here.

Rip tides and stuff. Pull people out into the deep and they drown."

She isn't quite sure how to respond. "Ah."

"I've lived by this ocean all my life. I mean I know it like the back of my hand. I'm going to be in the navy one day and then I'll get to be on it all the time..."

She sits and watches him talk. There is golden stubble along his jaw-line.

She wants to reach out and touch it. His eyelashes are long for a boy's.

Thickly charcoal.

"...Dad was in the army. Second World War and stuff. Reckons he almost got killed the one time." He rubs the end of his nose. "Ja. So what about you?"

"Pardon?" He is *so* golden.

"What's it like in Rhodesia?"

"It's alright. My parents are both teachers."

"That's why all the books, hey?"

"I suppose." She tries to think of something they might have in common.

"My father was also in the war, stationed in Italy. But he doesn't like to talk about it. He says wars are more about inflicting human suffering than fighting for justice." Sitting on the shining sand before a blue ocean, the idea of evil seems remote and unlikely- atrocities are committed in far away places surrounded by barbed wire and under iron-coloured clouds. They are captured in the black and white of a photograph; an emaciated prisoner in a concentration camp, the vacant gaze of a dead soldier whose torso has been blown to pieces. Imogen watches the crinkle of waves build as they reach the shore only to dissolve in white froth on the sand. "It's beautiful."

"What?"

"The ocean. I'll miss it when we go back home."

Adam whistles gently between his teeth, "No sea in Rhodesia, hey?"

"No sea."

Hazel's voice in her head: "Fackin' 'ell, Gen. Get on wif it!"

"But I can't! I don't know what to do!"

"Fer Gawd's sakes, it's not that hard! Move in a bit closer. Bat yer eyelids. Puff yer boobs out a bit."

"But I'm not like you. I don't know what he wants."

"He wants yer knickers off, stupid."

She giggles.

"What's so funny?" Adam is giving her a quizzical and slightly hurt look.

"Nothing. I was just remembering something."

He nods. Pokes the sand with a reproachful finger. She realises that this is her cue to say something that Shows An Interest.

"So how long have you wanted to be in the navy for?"

"Ever since I can remember." He pauses, "Here, I want to show you something."

He takes her hand and a warm pulse sings along her entire arm. She blinks, "What?"

"Come."

He leads her to the shore. They wait as the tide comes in and washes over their feet.

"What do you feel?"

"Um..." Is this a test? Think, Imogen, Think! He pulls her forward gently and they wade in deeper. The water is warm, the sand soft and sinking around her toes. "It's very nice."

The disappointment shows on his face.

"But don't you feel, I dunno, like it's...like it's how it must have felt before you were born. When you were surrounded by water."

"A sea change."

"Hey?"

She closes her eyes and recites,

"Full fathom five thy father lies

Of his bones are coral made,

Those, pearls that were his eyes

Nothing of him doth fade,

But doth suffer a sea change

Into something rich and strange."

There is silence.

"Who said that?"

"Shakespeare. *The Tempest*."

"Oh. I've never been much good at that book stuff."

She has said the wrong thing. She has made him feel stupid.

"But you explained it better. It must feel like being in the womb. Peaceful and warm and protected."

"Ja, that's right." They smile at each other. She swears she can hear romantic music somewhere in the distance; choirs of angels or something. A ray of sunlight caresses his features. It's like a film. *Maybe I should lean in a little bit closer.* She is knocked right off her feet. A large wave crashes upon them just as he begins to shout a warning. Everything becomes chaotic, it spins. She reaches for his hand but it's impossible to see anything. She can't breathe. And then her head breaks above the water, air fills her lungs and she opens her stinging eyes to the blue sky.

(3)

A summer sunset in Tuscany and the sky melts into purple. Edward puts his head back and allows himself the luxury of a deep breath. He exhales with slow concentration, his eyes closed, facial muscles relaxed. In the desert he had suffocated under sand. It crept into every crevice; his mouth, nostrils, eyes and ears. It seemed he moved through a fine, grainy mist that coated his skin with a permanence he thought he would never escape. When the army moved to Cairo they were stationed on the banks of the Nile along with other soldiers from the Commonwealth. He had joined the war effort out of a sense of moral outrage, out of an idea that there was an absolute evil to be fought, and that he was on the side of justice. Now he knows that he judged too simplistically. The evil exists everywhere. He heard stories from his men about small Egyptian boys thrown into the river with their throats slit after being caught stealing from the Allies' barracks. He believed them. The heat

infested the landscape with a kind of madness. Even he, who had lived all his life in Africa, could sometimes feel himself slip quietly into it. The air had been too thick to breathe.

But here in Italy, chasing the retreating Germans, he can permit himself to be human again.

"I'm going for a walk."

"Shouldn't you take your sidearm with you?" Dave is his best friend and second in command. They have fought together for two years.

"It's just a walk, Dave."

"I'd feel better if you took it. You never know what might happen."

Edward waves him off, "I'll be fine."

He leaves the camp for a Florence ignited by colour. It looks like a picture postcard to send home to one's wife, a reminder there is some beauty still, even in war. She is at home, thousands of miles away to the south. Margaret with her long golden hair. It was the first thing he noticed about her and it is what he misses most. He liked to twine it round his fingers and pull her face gently towards his own. *Come closer.*

As he walks he runs the tips of his fingers over the stone walls of the houses he passes. The smell of bread drifts down to him from an open window. A bicycle leans against a green painted door. Occasionally there is the low murmur of voices but the streets are quiet. It is still dangerous to be out after dark. The sound of his footsteps on the cobbles is muffled and he feels like a cat, senses heightened, padding solitary through the city dusk as if he owns it. A noise cuts through the silence. Screaming. He begins to run towards it and rounds the corner to see three men surrounding a girl of about fifteen. She is sprawled on the ground, nose bloody, dress torn so that her small

breasts are visible.

"Keep quiet and we won't hurt ya."

"We're the good guys, see?"

The accents are Canadian. They are Allies.

"Stop that!" His voice booms around the empty square. "Stop what you're doing, I said."

They are startled and turn quickly. But he is alone. A wiry, slender, dark-haired man in uniform shouting and running. "Stop that!"

"Yeah? What are you going to do about it?"

"Listen, just turn around and walk away. We're just having a little fun here. Okay buddy?"

"No." He can hear the girl crying very softly. Almost unobtrusively. "No, I won't."

The largest of the three starts towards him. He reaches for his sidearm, but of course it isn't there. He has left it behind at the camp. When they see his hand grasp for the absent weapon, their confidence increases. The man presses his palm against Edward's chest.

"You talk big for such a little guy."

His breath is warm and sour and Edward feels spittle brush his cheek. He realises he is terrified, his heart's beating is agony. They are going to kill him and the girl will be raped anyway. His bravery has shrivelled to nothing. All that's left is the noise of his breathing filling his skull. He is grabbed and lifted up under the arms. He has always been light, had thought of a career as a jockey as a boy.

"Put him down! Put him down or I'll shoot!"

The men stop. They drop him heavily and flee, shoes battering the ground. He lies motionless with his face pressed against the cold stones. They have a

peculiar smell, like history gone mouldy.

"Ed? Ed, are you all right?"

It is Dave.

"I'm fine."

He allows himself to be helped up. Dave's face is covered in sweat.

"Christ, that was close. I was sitting there in the camp, feeling more and more uncomfortable that you'd left your revolver behind. So I decided to follow you. Bloody good thing, too."

"Yes. You saved my life. Thank-you." They stare at each other. Edward staggers slightly.

"Where is she?"

"The girl? She's gone. Probably run home to her family."

Edward imagines the panic of discovering one's child is missing. He wonders if he will ever have daughters.

"Let's go back . I'm exhausted."

(4)

After two weeks, she and Adam are almost inseparable. He is unfailingly courteous and the perfect gentleman. Even her parents are charmed.

Eventually they grew suspicious of her changed behaviour. Edward prided himself on his knowledge of the devious workings of the adolescent mind and easily recognised the signs of infatuation in his daughter. Sitting at the dinner table one evening, he watched her push her food listlessly around her plate, chicken to one side, potato to the other, peas somewhere in the middle.

"That's a very artistic arrangement."

"Pardon?"

Her father pressed his napkin to his mouth and gave her A Look. "So what is his name?"

"Pardon?"

"His name, my girl. And don't lie to me, I'm not a fool."

She took a sip of her orange juice and said very quietly, "Adam."

He leant closer, "Could you repeat that, please?"

"His name is Adam."

"Well I think it's time we met this boy, don't you , Margaret?"

"Absolutely, dear."

"Bring him round for tea tomorrow afternoon at three-thirty." Tea is the favourite parental beverage. It may be thirty-five degrees outside but heaven forbid Mr and Mrs Anthony should miss their daily pot. She imagined them in the middle of a hurricane, delicately cradling their tea-cups. "Please pass the sugar, dear." The roof comes off. "Certainly." The family dog goes flying past. "Was that Patches?"

"I'm not sure. Another rusk?"

She did not want Adam to meet them, they would terrify him. Worse, he would think they were odd and then she would be odd by mere association.

"I think he's busy..." Her father glanced at her. "I'll ask him."

"Good. Now finish your dinner." He picked up his knife and fork and cut vigorously into the chicken.

End of Conversation.

Her experiences involving her father and boys are limited but catastrophic. John Morgan had been her first proper kiss. She saw him in Salisbury at school events as the captain in first team rugby matches, muscles stretching, dark hair falling across his forehead.

"Who's *that*?"

"John Morgan." Her friend Felicity gave her a nudge with her elbow.

"Yummy, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Parents own a farm in Zambia. He's in Robbie's dorm at St. George's."

Robbie was Felicity's on-off fling. A pleasant-faced boy with a motorbike whom Imogen had met before at parties.

"Really?"

"In fact, he's staying with Robbie in Gwelo during the hols. We'll both be back by then, too."

She hesitates. "I don't think he'd be interested in me."

"Rubbish, Gen. You're gorgeous. Trust me."

She had only just emerged from her ugly-duckling phase and the thought of being found attractive was still a novelty.

"Are you sure?"

"Just leave it to me. I'll arrange everything."

On a Saturday night two weeks later, she waited dressed and preened by the window for the sound of Robbie's motorbike. It was the only mode of transport between them, so he was required to fetch and ferry them each separately to the cinema. She was the last to be picked up.

"Now, remember, I want you home by exactly eleven. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Dad."

He had agreed to let her go because it was a double date and she knew better than to push her luck by being insubordinate.

"I'll be back by eleven."

Robbie arrived and shook Awful Anthony's hand with the appropriate nervousness.

"Good evening, Sir."

"Evening, Chambers. She has a curfew of eleven."

"Of course, Sir."

Her father lifted a warning finger. "If anything happens, Chambers, I'll hold you personally responsible."

The boy's voice quavered slightly, "Yes, Sir."

"Jesus. H. Christ, Anthony. Your dad's a dragon!"

"Tell me something I don't know."

As they walked towards Gwelo's only movie theatre, she felt her insides twist and knot. Felicity and John were waiting for them inside. His eyes were very blue. Her stomach flipped and she glanced at him bashfully.

"Hello."

"Hi."

Whilst the other two walked ahead with easy familiarity, Robbie's arm around Felicity's waist and her head on his shoulder, they could only smile shyly. When he sat down next to her in the darkened theatre, the warmth from his leg tingled along her own. Half-way through, the hero declared his undying adoration for the heroine and his hand slipped around hers. She thought her heart would explode. By the film's end, their legs and fingers were so entwined they nearly fell over when they tried to stand up. Robbie looked at his watch.

"Shit, it's past eleven. I'd better get Gen home or her dad will have my hide."

She couldn't hide her dismay, "I don't want to leave just yet."

"Give us a few more minutes, Rob. Take Felicity home first."

"Okay, but I'm not sure about this. I have a feeling we may all live to regret

it.”

They walked outside to the car park and watched the motorbike pull away. The night was warm but she shivered next to him. They leant together against a car and suddenly he was very close, his breath on her face. He said, “Imogen,” and then kissed her very gently on the lips. She opened her mouth a little and he slid his tongue in. She thought, “Wow. I can’t believe my luck. I can’t believe...”

Suddenly there was a blast of light in front of them. She buried her head in his jacket. He swore. “Some bastard’s got us pinned in his headlights.” Her heart plummeted. She knew who the bastard was.

“Get your hands off my daughter THIS INSTANT!”

She didn’t move. Perhaps if she pretended this wasn’t happening, he might disappear.

“I said Get Your Hands Off!”

She pulled away from the startled boy. “Dad...”

“Into the car! Now!” His expression was so livid she dared not disobey.

“If I see you near my daughter again, so help me God, I’ll shoot you!”

“Dad!”

“Not a Word from you, my girl!”

She would never forget the stunned look on John Morgan’s face. He seemed unable to speak. They left him there in the parking lot, his hands in the air as if he’d been told to *stick-em up*. The next day he left to spend the rest of the holidays on his farm in Zambia. She wasn’t allowed out for two weeks. But Salisbury was too small a place for them to avoid each other completely and she saw him again at a party a month later. He turned away as if he didn’t know her.

Adam was different, he seemed to know exactly what to say. He stood up

when her mother entered the room. He laughed and smiled in all the right places. He called them "Sir" and "Madam." She couldn't quite believe it when after he left, her father turned and said with obvious reluctance, "He appears a decent sort. All right, Imogen, you may continue to see him. But if I sense anything...untoward is going on, you shall cease to do so immediately."

It's all worked out so well, she thinks the next day as she changes into the forbidden bikini. A perfect holiday romance by the sea, complete with parental approval. And she's getting a tan. She is packing her one-piece back in her bag when she hears two girls walk into the changing rooms. They have strident English accents and are talking loudly.

"I wonder what it means?"

"Why don't we ask someone?"

"Excuse me," the taller of the two approaches a middle-aged woman sitting on a bench near Imogen's cubicle. She ducks behind the door so that she can see them even though she remains hidden. For some reason they make her feel uncomfortable.

"Excuse me, but what does the sign above the door say?"

The woman stands up and puts a towel around her waist. "It means only white people can use these changing rooms. No blacks allowed." She walks outside and the two girls make disgusted sounds.

"What an appalling country this is."

"Dreadful. Thank God we don't actually live here."

"And to think that Africans are the *majority*."

Imogen doesn't wait to hear any more. Her dream holiday is already shattered. The rot beneath the glitter has been exposed. She has never

thought about those signs, or what they mean. She slinks out into the sun as quietly as she is able, ashamed, and makes her way to the grey municipal caravans that serve as shelter for the lifeguards. Several of them are off-duty and are standing around outside. Even without her glasses on she recognises Adam's upright form, his blonde hair reflecting white glints under the sun.

"Babe, what's wrong?"

She is almost in tears, "There were these girls and they said awful things...and...and..."

As she babbles the story out to him his expression becomes furious.

"Those cows! Who do they think they are?" His face is taut with anger. She is taken aback.

"Well I...I'm just being silly. It was nothing really."

"This isn't their country! Stupid English cows! Come on," he gestures to the other boys, "let's go and find them and teach them a lesson."

"Adam!" Suddenly she is frightened. She has never seen him like this.

"Adam, wait!" He does not appear to hear her, is already running for the changing rooms.

She hurries after him. His rage is palpable and she is afraid of what he might do should they still be there.

"Adam!" But she can't see properly and it is difficult to run in the sand. Her feet keep sinking and tripping as she tries to avoid sunbathers and picnickers. Her heart

thunks nauseatingly in her chest. What has she done?

She arrives out of breath and shaking to discover that the only people there are a woman with a young child who is delighted to see the lifeguards and claps his hands in excitement. The girls have vanished into the crowd.

"Sorry, my babe." His voice is consoling as he puts his arms around her, "We

haven't got much hope of finding them now."

"It's all right," she says, "let's go back to the caravan. Please."

For the rest of the day she watches him carefully for any further sign of the fury that had consumed him, but it has disappeared. He is as gentle and kind to her as always. Still, the shock remains. She lets him walk her back to the bus stop and kiss her on the cheek. "G'bye, babe. See you tomorrow."

"Yes. Bye."

She climbs on and makes her way towards her usual backseat, aware this time that there are only white faces around her. The day's events have reminded her of when she was thirteen and still caught the bus to and from school. Since her parents lived on the outskirts of town, hers was the second to last stop and she always kept a book with her to stave off boredom. On a sunlit afternoon in winter, she got on and was surprised to see a black woman sitting on the front seat behind the driver. Although Rhodesia didn't implement petty apartheid, it was accepted that whites sat at the front and blacks at the back. She found a seat a few rows behind the woman and took out her book; Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea. She was so caught up in its adventure that she didn't realise the group of white boys had boarded the bus until she heard them speak.

"What's this stupid black bitch doing here?"

"Ja, doesn't she know that kaffirs are supposed to sit at the back?"

"Fuck off to the back, kaffir."

The woman sat immobile and stared ahead whilst they continued to swear at her. She barely breathed and they made no effort to touch her.

"Kaffir."

"Bitch."

“Whore.”

Behind her book, Imogen was frozen. She knew she should come to the woman's defence and make some form of protest, but she was too afraid. She felt sick with fear. She stayed where she was and closed her eyes and prayed they would leave. Please God please God make them go away. After a few minutes the bus came to a halt and the boys got off, gesturing obscenely. Once more, there were just the two of them, but she remained paralysed. She looked out of the window. The sun was setting the surrounding landscape beautifully aflame. When the bus arrived at the corner outside her house, she stood up and walked to the front. As the door opened she turned and said, “I'm sorry.”

The woman did not respond, but looked right through her as though she had never spoken. Imogen understood. It meant nothing.

(5)

Summer nights in Durban are humid and lie close to the skin. Imogen is walking barefoot, her toes leaving faint imprints in the cool sand. It is New Year's Eve and she is drunk. She has come out here to be alone; the lifeguard's party has disintegrated. There was vomit all over the club floor, young men passed out around its perimeter, their expressions holding a strange sweet oblivion. She loves this solitude. Ever since she can remember, she has understood herself to be different to other people. Sometimes she has a sensation of disembodiment, a cool process of observation and classification. These are my hands picking up a glass, my feet in the sand, my lips forming words. She sees herself enacting these

gestures of ordinary life, but they are just impressions. The real Imogen is somewhere else.

As she walks away she becomes Shakespeare's Viola, freshly shipwrecked, treading the beaches of an unfamiliar land. Mourning her lost twin.

"Sebastian," she calls, "Sebastian." The waves mimic her softly, ssseeebaaaassstiaaann.. I alone have survived. He is gone. She lets the tears fall quietly and reaches her arms out.

Sebastian.

"Who?"

Adam has followed her outside.

"Gen? Are you okay? Who are you talking to?" He is wearing a sack, his attempt to meet the party's fancy dress theme. "What are you supposed to be?" she asked when he arrived to fetch her.

"I'm just a sackman."

"What's a sackman?"

His expression was deadpan, "A man who wears a sack." Unsure whether to take him seriously, she allowed herself a baffled giggle. "Well then sackman, do escort me to the ball."

He took her arm with a grin, "Only a pleasure, my babe." She loved that, his use of the possessive. The ownership inscribed in the words made her feel safe. *My babe.*

"Who are you talking to?"

"No one but myself."

He gives her a confused look, "I don't understand."

She walks over to him and takes his hand. Her head is still light from the alcohol and she feels invincible. Irresistible.

*"Bold Lover, never, never, canst thou kiss
Though winning near the goal-yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love and she be fair!"*

"Hey?"

"It's from Keats. Isn't the moon bright? Look at it. It's shining for the New Year." She puts her arms around him and inhales the salty scent of his skin. She wants to lick his neck.

"Gen..."

"Swim with me to the moon, Adam." She thinks: we'll be like the lovers in D.H. Lawrence. The ones who drown together and are found entwined and naked. Locked forever in passion's embrace.

"Hey?"

"Let's get into the sea."

He is nonplussed, "But I'll get my socks wet."

"Adam." He takes her hand, swaying slightly to his left. "Let's go home." She protests, "But..." He pulls her gently away from the sea's edge. "You shouldn't swim in the ocean at night, anyway. It's dangerous." She sighs, but allows herself to be guided in the direction of the car. As always he opens the door for her, although this time he fumbles with the lock. She says, "Thank you, kind Sir," and offers her cheek. He has never kissed her properly.

"Time to go home." He gets in and closes the door with a thunk. She watches his profile as he starts the engine and the headlights come on. In the dark she can decipher only a vague outline; tousled hair, nose, chin. She smiles and winds the window down. The air rushing into her face makes her eyes smart and she closes them. Her hair whips against her skin. It's as if she

is falling slowly through a tunnel, spinning even though she is stationary. Adam's cough startles her out of her reverie. She puts her hand on his thigh and rubs her fingers along the taut muscle. He shifts his weight. "Gen..." She moves her hand away. "Sorry."

She is suddenly chilly and hugs herself. What is he so afraid of? She just wants to touch him. She thought boys were interested in sex, but he treats her as if she were china; some pure ideal of ladylike virginity that restrains him and keeps her passive. She sighs. He is driving slowly, frowning with concentration. Even with the window open she can smell the alcohol on his breath. She wonders if he is aware of what his presence does to her. When she is close to him the muscles in her abdomen contract with an ache that travels through her entire body. She never expected to discover such a capacity for desire within herself. It both excites and frightens her. The excessive actions of passion she used to read about with such scorn now make sense. She has dreams from which she wakes shaking and shocked, covered in a film of sweat.

They pass a bakkie loaded with shouting revellers.

"Bloody idiots." He glances at her affectionately. "You all right?"

"I'm fine." She bites her lip. They are nearing the flats and her parent's bedroom light is still on. He pulls the car over and stops the engine. She moves to open her door but he gets out and opens it for her with a slight bow.

The air smells of jasmine.

"Thank you." She hesitates shyly. He takes her right hand and envelops it with his own, then turns and leads her through the open gate and into the garden. As her feet touch the grass she realises that she has left her sandals behind at the club.

"Oh bugger, Adam. My shoes..."

"Don't worry about them."

She looks up at him and his expression is intense. Her heart clutches at the thought he might be going to kiss her. Properly. With tongues.

Then he does something completely surprising; he gets down upon one knee and says, "Imogen Anthony, will you marry me?"

It is very quiet. She blinks.

"Pardon?"

"Will you marry me?"

"Yes." She says the word without thinking. Just lets herself be borne away by the moment, the moonlight, the jasmine. "Yes, I will." He picks her up and kisses her firmly on the lips. "I love you."

"I love you too."

Above their heads a door opens. Her father's voice, "Imogen, is that you?"

She thinks that it doesn't matter whether or not she answers, but Adam whispers in her ear, "You should go up, they'll be worried about you." He squeezes her again. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes."

"Imogen?"

"Coming, Dad."

She climbs the steps barely able to breathe. Ed is waiting for her in the doorway.

"Where's Adam?" He inhales deeply and his nostrils flare. "Have you been drinking?"

She looks over his shoulder at the clock on the wall. It is half - past twelve on the first of January 1968 and she has just become engaged.

"No," she says. "I love him."

Let's consider for a moment the word Love. Never has a combination of letters so enthralled or confused, guided or misled the lumpy masses of humanity, and like spices on a shelf in Woolies, there exists a veritable plethora of sentiment from which to choose;

Salt and Pepper Combo- *The familial love of the spice rack, this is a staple without which much food would be unpalatable. Most of us take it for granted, there on the table whether we ask for it or not. But use too much salt, and one's tongue is liable to turn to biltong. Too little and one can taste only blandness.*

Lemon and Herb- *Another reliable favourite, we think of this as the friendship spice. Like the best friendships it is stimulating company, but easy to be around. Lemon and Herb does not make any demanding or hysterical assault upon the sense and it's always there when you need it. Plato described friendship as the purest form of love, and we bet he'd be a Nando's Lemon and Herb Chicken fan.*

Exotic Thai- *The sexy spice is used to flavour all romantic love. Its tangy, sweet scent is at first intoxicatingly addictive, the consequence of which is all manner of rash and inadvisable behaviour. Our advice is to use sparingly. Get some of it in your eyes and the sting will be enough to make you weep.*

Ganja- *More herb than spice, consumption of this in one's food will nonetheless result in a universal and profound love for one's fellow man. Unfortunately, the sensation tends to be temporary and leads to over-consumption of fattening edibles. Most notably chocolate.*

When Edward asked Margaret to marry him they were sitting under a tree on her parent's lawn in Winterton. It was spring and the village was only just beginning to free itself from the mountain snow that had fallen through most of winter. She was wearing a long black coat and a muffler. He remembered how blue her eyes had been against the coat's dark collar, strands of her hair flung about her face by a wind which came down from the peaks still sharp with snow. Sitting in his study thirteen years later, he thought about all the now distant promises he made to himself for her and took another sip of his coffee. It was ten past six in the morning but the coastal air was thick with humidity and it seemed to drown him. He was usually awake at this time preparing for the school day ahead, but he'd been woken by the ring of the phone almost an hour earlier. It took him a few minutes to recognise the voice,

"Ed? Frank Steyn. Look, I've got a copy of *The Star* here and you're in it..."

He stood in his bare feet in the hallway and listened as his wife shifted in her sleep, disturbed by the jangle of the phone and his answering voice. Across from him their two young daughters shared a bedroom. He could just make out Hannah's breathing through the half-open door. Her blocked sinuses meant she tended to snore. Imogen had turned four last week. They bought her teddy bear for her birthday and she named him Mr Humph.

It occurred to him belatedly that he hadn't heard much from Frank since his move to Johannesburg in September. An important position in Education. It was a step he expected to make when his headmastership of the small Natal high school came to an end. But The Star was a Jo'burg paper, self-

important, liberal, anti-Nationalist. Why were they concerned with a small-town headmaster?

"Ed, are you listening to me? It's your speech, they've printed a speech you made. Are you deliberately trying to get up the government's arse?"

He said "Pardon?" and closed his eyes. The speech. He'd made it at prize-giving over a week ago. That it had been printed in a well-known newspaper surprised and alarmed him. He didn't deserve such attention. He didn't want it.

"A very humanitarian gesture, Ed. But you can forget about getting another job in this country. The Nats will make your life miserable. They've probably blacklisted you already. Ed, I'm trying to help you as a friend. Ed?"

He didn't recall much of what happened after he put the phone down. The noise of his slippers against the wooden floors as he walked to the kitchen and made coffee, the slide of leather on the bare backs of his knees when he sat down in his study chair. All his senses were muffled. More vivid was the memory of two weeks ago when the boys had first come into his office. He had been writing the prize-giving speech and barely noticed when his secretary knocked on his open door.

"Mr Anthony?"

"Yes, Cynthia?"

"There are two pupils here who want to speak to you." This caused him to look up. It was not often that a student came to visit him voluntarily. He recognised the boys almost instantly, knew all the children at his school by name and class. It was one of the things that made him so intimidating. These two were in standard six and hard workers of the unobtrusive sort. He rarely saw them apart.

"Jenkins, Warburg. What seems to be the problem?"

"Tell Mr Anthony what you saw, boys." The secretary pushed them gently into his office and he noticed how pale they were under their summer tans. Jenkins had a long gash on his left knee. The blood welled bright against bruised flesh. Ed stood up as slowly and unthreateningly as he could. They were like small animals caught in a snare.

"Cynthia, bring some plasters and ointment, will you? And two sweet cups of tea, please."

He ushered them carefully towards the settee and they sat obediently.

"Now," he squatted down next to them and felt the pull in his back. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"W...w...we....," Warburg's brown eyes filled and he felt a twinge of alarm; Thirteen-year-old boys were not given to bursting into tears in front of each other. They were very frightened.

"It's all right," he patted the boy's shoulder awkwardly, "you can talk to me."

They told him the story hesitatingly and in between long slurps of tea. As they cycled to school that morning, they had seen a group of white policemen beat a black man to what seemed to be the point of death on the side of the road. He nodded as they talked, then went to stand outside whilst Jenkins watched Cynthia clean his knee through ginger eyelashes. He looked back at the two boys in his office. He studied the sky. He ran his hand over his face.

"You have been very brave, but I'm going to ask you to be braver." They turned to him apprehensively. "I'm going to ask you to take me to where you saw the man being beaten and I want you to show it to the police sergeant." They winced in unison and he knelt next to them again. "It's important that

we do this. An injustice has been committed and something must be done. You did the right thing by coming to tell me. I'll make sure nothing happens to you."

"Y...yes, Sir."

"Good. Now what was the name of the road?" He reached for the telephone and began to dial the number of the police station.

The day was sunny and hot. Even at half past eight in the morning he could feel the sweat forming on his skin. His black car with its leather seats was a heat trap, and he was grateful that the sun had a few hours yet to reach its full strength. The boys climbed into the back and he closed the door heavily behind them. As he got in he could sense their gaze upon him and when he glanced up to the rear view mirror, his eyes caught on Jenkins'. The boy looked away quickly, his cheeks flushing. "It'll be all right. I won't let anything happen to you." They pulled out of the school gates and drove along the beachfront. There were a number of mothers out with babies and toddlers, their bright clothes reflecting the sunshine. The road wound up into green suburbs. They had driven for about five minutes when the boys directed him down a street on their left. There were police vehicles ahead. There must have been at least three and he wondered at their speed in arriving so soon. The spot itself was shady and quiet, surrounded by Jacaranda trees. It looked like the sort of place one might take one's shoes off to rest. He was angered to see that there were five or six policemen clustered under one of the trees. It seemed an obvious intimidation tactic, this group of large men against the two small boys. He got out and gestured to them to follow him. One of the men came forward.

"Good morning. I'm Mr Anthony and these boys are my pupils. Are you the

officer to whom I spoke on the telephone?"

"My name is Nel and I'm in charge here."

"Have you been informed as to why I phoned?"

The other man's lip curled, "Ja." He peered at the boys. "Wat het julle gesien?" Warburg looked as though he might be sick.

"Tell him what you saw, boys. I believe you." But they were mute, eyes fixed upon the gun at Nel's belt.

"They can't even say what they saw, want hulle het niks gesien nie! Do you see any blood here, Meneer? Any struggle? There is no proof! Ek weet julle lieg! Julle is net 'n paar skelms!"

"That is enough!" he stepped in front of them. "How dare you threaten my students! Jenkins, Warburg, don't let this man frighten you!" There were retching sounds behind him.

"Please, Sir. May we go home?" Jenkins pulled at his sleeve. "I can't remember anything." He started to tell him to stop being so damn cowardly when he saw the fear on the boy's face and remembered how young he was. He sighed and put his hand on the other's still heaving back.

"All right." He turned to the triumphant policeman. "This isn't the last you'll hear from me." The man gave him a sneer and walked away.

"Let's go." As he led them back to the car, he heard rough laughter behind them,

"Fokken kaffir het nie sy Pass gehad nie."

He took the boys home to their mothers. They had begun the process of forgetting already. Then he went back to his office and re-wrote his speech. A copy of it still sat on the desk in front of him, stained by the bottom of his coffee mug. "*Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to share with you an*

incident which occurred in our own town less than a week ago. An incident which I believe undermines the ethos of humanity and decency which we at this school have always endeavoured to encourage..." He wished he could burn it and the thought ashamed him; he had done what was right. But the regret was impossible to ignore. He cursed under his breath and pulled a handkerchief out of his pyjama pocket to blow his nose. He was beginning to get a headache, it pulsed at his right temple like a heart beat. On the wall in front of him hung a map of Africa and he let his eyes run over it. South Africa, South-West Africa, Rhodesia.

"Daddy!" Imogen had climbed onto his lap before he was even aware she was in the room. He was startled and snapped at her,

"Silly girl, you'll make me spill my coffee!"

Her bottom lip trembled, "I brought Mr Humph to say hello."

"Of course you did. I'm sorry." He shook the furry paw, "Hello Mr Humph."

"I couldn't sleep. Could you, Daddy?"

"No, I couldn't."

She gave him a confidential look and said in a low whisper, "Hannah makes funny noises with her nose."

"I'm sure she doesn't mean to." His attention was still held by the map on the wall. Imogen sighed restlessly and hung her teddy bear upside down by his blue legs.

"Mr Humph says he wants some porridge. Please may we have some porridge, Daddy?"

He nodded absently, "Go to the kitchen but be quiet, you don't want to wake your mother and sister up. I'll be there shortly." She clambered down and made exaggerated tiptoe movements.

"I am quieter as a mouse"

He got up slowly and went over to the map. Traced the outline of Rhodesia with his index finger before following his daughter out of the room.

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She has had Mr Humph for as long as she can remember. Humph short for Humphrey. His blue fur is tatty and an eye is missing, but she takes him with her whenever they go away. They are lying together on her bed now, his fluffy muzzle in the hollow of her shoulder.

"They don't understand," she says and pulls the toy closer to her chest.

"They've never understood me." She recalls the expression upon her father's face when she told him that Adam asked her to marry him. She expected outrage but all he did was laugh.

"Don't be ridiculous, my girl. You're sixteen and he's not even eighteen. Now get to bed and we'll talk in the morning when you're making more sense." Once again, she had been dismissed and belittled. This seems to be the only form of communication that exists between them. Her mother was always politely distant, but her father has changed. Something has hardened inside him. Crystallised. One day she is afraid she will be able to look straight through him to a barely pulsating heart. In the September holidays she arrived back from boarding school to a house brittle with tension. Her parents argued quietly but fiercely whenever they thought she was out of earshot. Her mother complained even more than usual of a strain upon her nerves. Imogen took to long walks around their large property. She would find a tree and smoke an illicit cigarette or several, convinced that life was shit and all parents were arsesholes. She began to spend as much time as she

could with friends while she waited for the holiday to be over. Then one afternoon she returned home after a night away to discover her mother alone in the house.

"Are these yours?" The last word emerged as a hiss. Imogen looked at the box of cigarettes in her hand. She thought she'd hidden them cleverly at the bottom of her cupboard.

"I..."

"Don't lie to me!" She shook her by the arm.

"Ouch! Mum..."

"You don't understand anything, do you?"

"Understand what?"

"Your father..." She stopped in mid-sentence and was silent.

"Mum?"

"Shut-up. Just shut-up." Her grip on her daughter's skin tightened before she turned and walked into her bedroom. The door slammed.

Imogen stood very still and examined her arm. There was a line of red marks just below her elbow. She looked at them dispassionately. *I am detached.*

This is my arm, my skin hurting. But it is not me. Christ, I need a ciggie.

She made her way carefully to the kitchen where she stored her most cunningly concealed stash of fags. The outside bottom rim of the dustbin was just wide enough to hold a small plastic packet with a few cigarettes. The last place even the most prying of parents would think to check. She removed the packet and went outside. The tears forming in her eyes made everything jagged. Trees jutted at peculiar angles. It was like being in one of those abstract paintings she studied at school. Whassisname? Picasso. Her foot caught upon a root and she fell forward.

"Shit!" She had cut her shin. She sat down and wiped the blood with a

moistened finger. The more she tried to clean it away, the more it welled up to trickle down her leg.

“Dammit! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

She leant back against the tree and let the sun warm her. It felt like a benediction, a soothing hand upon her head. As much as she despised her mother, she knew what was wrong. Earlier that day her friend’s father beckoned her over and said, “So I see your Dad’s in the newspaper. Front page no less.” He gave it to her and she read the article quickly, eyes running from left to right.

LOCAL HEADMASTER TAKES PROMINENT MP TO COURT

Local Salisbury headmaster Mr Edward Anthony, today instituted civil proceedings against well-known MP Van der Bijl and two others. Mr Anthony’s lawyers cited interference in school policy and trespassing as the reasons for the suit, which is expected to continue for several days. Although none of the parties were available for comment, the issue in contention is the school’s policy of inter-racial sport. With the support of MP Van der Bijl, two parents of pupils at the school, Misters Van Wyk and De Klerk, entered the property without permission and encouraged students to sign a petition against participation in a multi-racial schools rugby event. At present, Hawthorn High is the only white high school in Salisbury to take part in such competitions. The case promises several interesting developments, as both Van Wyk and De Klerk have already been linked to the South African Broederbond...

Lying with Mr Humph in her arms, she remembers the look on her father's face when he told them he had been demoted. Her mother's hand went to her mouth as a small sigh escaped. He was standing by the sitting room window and behind him Imogen could see the large Jacaranda tree that dominated the garden. It was one of her favourite places to sit. As a child she used clamber around at its base, hunting for gnomes. She knew they lived there, because she could hear them talking. If she was lucky she would happen upon some tiny evidence of their existence. A leaf used for a blanket, a gnome steed disguised as a gnarly beetle. But she could never find them, they were persistently elusive. She had pushed away the memory as her father slumped against the window pane and the rub of his clothing against the glass made a sad, defeated squeak.

"Why do these things happen, Mr Humph?"

"I don't know. Go to sleep."

When she wakes the sun is in her eyes and her mouth is dry. She has a faint headache. She glances at the clock on her side table and is surprised to see it's already eleven. Her parents never let her sleep this late. She sits up cautiously, because the headache is threatening invade her entire skull, and picks Mr Humph from off the floor. She must have thrown him there some time during the night. She has never been good at sharing a bed. Her first thought is: I'm engaged. Her second: they are never going to let me out of the flat.

"Should I go downstairs, Mr Humph, or should I escape out of the window?"

The teddy bear looks at her solemnly with his single eye, "I'm afraid you'll have to risk the former. You forget that this flat is three storeys from the ground and a leap out of the window would inevitably result in your death."

He pauses, "Or at the very least, severe injury."

"You're right. And my sincere apologies for chucking you out of the bed."

He sighs long-sufferingly, "You need not worry. A bear can learn to tolerate all sorts of ill-treatment."

But how is she going to negotiate her way out of the parental clutches and get to beach and her betrothed? She finds that she lacks the energy to formulate any cunning plan. Even dressing will be an effort. She decides to wing it, if they refuse to let her out of the door, she'll just have to threaten suicide or hysteria. In her dresser is a clean pair of shorts and a t-shirt. She puts them on and packs a small bag (*Just in case we have to elope. I'll come back for you, Mr Humph*). In the bathroom she cleans her teeth and washes her face. She looks tired and somehow older. Maybe this is what happens when one falls in love; one ages a few years. Her parents are in the sitting room, reading their books and drinking tea.

"Off to the beach, my girl?" Damn. She should have known better than to try to sneak past.

"Um..."

"Be home by five then." She is about to utter a denial when it occurs to her that she has not been forbidden to do anything. They are going to let her go without mention of the previous night. Immediately she is suspicious, but to fail to take advantage of this rare leniency would be stupid.

"I'll see you later, then."

They nod in unison.

It's a public holiday so she has to walk to the beach. The sun is halfway through the sky and the heat intense. By the time she arrives she is sweating and exhausted. She forgot to pack any water and her throat is screaming for liquid. She stamps through the crowds to the lifeguard caravan, sure that all

her discomfort will dissipate the moment she sees him. But he isn't there. She is confused.

"Where's Adam?"

The other lifeguards avoid looking in her in the eye. Their response is uniform;

"Erm...dunno."

"How can you not know? Haven't you seen him?" They shrug.

She can't understand it, something must have gone wrong. Perhaps he was in an accident; perhaps he's dying on the side of a road, or has drowned trying to save someone. She thinks: *I have to find him* and sets off back through the heat and the sweaty throng. She walks for half an hour, dodging small children and sandcastles, overweight fathers munching boerie rolls, harassed mothers with worn grimaces. It occurs to her for the first time that the beach can be hellish. It is too hot and there are too many people pretending to enjoy themselves; they fight over tiny patches of sand and descend en masse into the sea where they kick each other underwater. Just as she is about to give up, she spots him standing on the edge of the shore, his arms folded against his chest, eyes on the ocean. Her heart dips.

"Adam!"

He can't have heard her because he doesn't turn around. She calls louder and runs up to him.

"Adam! I'm so glad I found you and I didn't know where you were and I thought something might have happened I...what's wrong?"

He won't look at her, but stares down at his feet.

"Oh. Hi."

She touches his arm and he moves away.

"Adam..."

“Look Gen, I can’t talk. I’ve got to keep focused on the sea.”

“But I...”

“Sorry. I’m busy.”

“But last night...”

“I wasn’t myself. It was a mistake. I’m sorry.”

She stares at him for a full minute. Then she turns around and walks away.

Getting your heart broken is rather like witnessing a miracle. You know it’s physically impossible, but the experience is utterly real. Imogen thinks she should be dead, because hers must have shattered into a thousand tiny pieces. Amazingly, she keeps on walking, breathing, living. She finds a phone booth and digs around in her bag for some coins. Dials the number and waits for the voice on the other end.

“Dad? Please come and fetch me.”

Now here’s the funny thing about parents; they are full of surprises.

Imogen’s led her to her bedroom. Made her a cup of tea. Patted her head, and were uncharacteristically soothing and sympathetic.

“I...I...I thought he l...loved me.” The words are hiccups.

Her mother rubs her back. “He’s given himself a fright by proposing to you, dear. Boys of his age aren’t very mature.”

The pain is outrageous. She thinks she is going to be sick. The sheets bunch in her hands.

“Why?”

“I can’t tell you. There are just some things one has to learn to accept.” But she doesn’t want to accept it. She is humiliated and anguished. She sits up forcefully,

"I hate him! I hope he drowns!"

"Imogen." Her father's tone is stern, "That is not the sort of thing one should say about anyone."

"I don't care! I hate him!" She flings herself back down onto her pillow and sobs loudly.

"You have to remember that Adam has treated you well up to now. He's taken you out to dinner, paid for you, bought you things. You need to handle this with dignity. You need to handle it like a man."

Like a *what*? If she weren't so miserable she'd have to suppress a giggle. She takes the handkerchief her mother offers and blows her nose.

"So what am I supposed to do?"

The next day, Edward drives her to the beach. She is wearing her prettiest cotton dress and her hair is tied back. Nausea flutters at the base of her stomach. He parks as close to the caravan as possible.

"Good luck."

She gets out of the car and walks towards a group of lifeguards standing outside. Adam is among them. All sound is muted, she can hear only her own heart-beat and breathing. They see her coming and the others part around him, like the Red Sea for Moses, she thinks. His expression is one of extreme embarrassment. She goes up to him, shakes his hand and says, "I just want to say that it has been a pleasure to know you and that I'm grateful for all the things you have done for me. Take care of yourself. Goodbye." She doesn't wait for his astonished response, but the walk back to the car is an eternity. She fights to keep her shoulders straight and not to cry. As they drive away she begins to weep softly and her father puts his hand on her back.

“Good girl, Imogen. You did the right thing.”

They leave Durban a few days later. She never sees Adam again.

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The Child's Survival Guide- Lesson 11: Fear

Everyone fears something. Superman was afraid of kryptonite, the farmer's wife was scared of mice, Piglet was petrified of Heffalumps. The best way to deal with the things you fear is avoidance. None of this confronting or facing up to it rubbish. Our advice is to turn and run. Run like hell.

She can't believe it. She wriggles a little to her left, then a bit to her right. A bit more. Nothing. She's trapped. She is reminded of Winnie the Pooh, who ate so much honey he became stuck in Rabbit's hole and had to be starved for a week before Rabbit's Friends and Relations could pull him out. She doesn't want to be starved.

“Susan...”

“What?”

“When are you coming out?” Sam's voice is reproachful.

“I can't.”

“What do you mean, you can't?”

“I can't move.”

“Susan...”

“What?!”

“We’re going to get into trouble.”

“I know, stupid.”

“You’re the one who’s stupid.”

She would hit him for that if she could, but she is pinned between the two walls of the drainpipe. Immobile. It is dark and musky, there are piles of leaves and detritus; shelter for snakes and spiders. Despite her love for *Charlotte’s Web*, she has always had an aversion to spiders, especially the big ones. She thinks there must be more nasty insects in Africa than any other place on earth. She has spent innumerable nights hiding under her bed as they whiz around her room. Mosquitoes, moths bent on suicide, the occasional evil-looking praying mantis. But the spiders are the worst. The ones that come into the house after the rains are large and hairy. Flat like dinner plates. She screams whenever she sees them,

“AARRRGHHH!”

“Don’t be silly, Susan. It’s just a spider,” her grandmother prods her with a skinny finger. “Stop being so melodramatic.”

There are other, more colourful varieties, with smooth, bulging bodies and spindly little legs. She encounters these on her garden forages and gives them a wide berth because they look bad-tempered. But the scariest, nastiest, most venomous spider is not big, it is tiny. The Black Widow. The mere name is enough to make her shiver. At school, a game ranger dressed in khaki gave them talks on how to cope with Poisonous Bites. He was positively jovial as he demonstrated how to cut through infected skin and suck a wound.

“And then you spit it out like this...” he made a hawking sound and the children laughed obligingly. Susan was not reassured. She reckons once

you're bitten, you're a goner. She imagines it as a scene from a Wild West movie.

Setting : Deserted town somewhere in the America of the 1830's. A mean wind blows a small dust storm around our two heroes. They are dressed in full cowboy regalia.

Jamie-Lee (prostrate upon ground): "Well, shoot, Billy-Bob. I done been bitten by one dem Black Widders. I reckon this is the end."

Billy-Bob: "Gosh darn it, Jamie-Lee! Don't you give up on me now, ya hear?"

A lone tumbleweed rolls past.

Jamie-Lee: "I thank I can hear angels. They singin' me to heaven..."

Billy-Bob: "Dammit, Jamie, hold on! Jamie-Lee?"

Jamie-Lee (smiling calmly despite obvious pain): "Tell Peggy-Sue I never did love anyone more as her..."

(Twitches and coughs. Eyes roll upwards.)

Billy-Bob (Sobbing): "Jamie-Leeeeee..."

"Suuusan?"

Bloody hell. "WHAT?"

"I'm going to call Granddad."

"No!" She is propelled into a vigorous spurt of wriggling. If there is one thing she fears more than the terror of spiders, it is the wrath of her grandfather.

"Sam, don't! " Wrigglewriggle, "I'm coming out now!" It's too late; she can hear his footsteps walking away. Susan rests her head on her arms. Ahead of her is a bright circle of sunlight. The end of the tunnel. She wills it to come

closer. *Pleeeeeease. Maybe if I stretch a bit harder...* She puts her arms out. "Ennnnngh!" From the near distance, the sound of cars passing by on the main road reaches her. She envies them; they are speeding into sparkling, smack-free futures whilst she is shortly to Get It in the Neck. The twins soon learnt that Granddad was Not To Be Messed With. He is a formidable disciplinarian.

"Samuel! Finish your cabbage!"

"Susan! Chew thirty-times before swallowing!"

"Don't back-chat your mother! Do your homework! Make your bed! Sit up straight!" After a brief and ill-fated period of resistance, they were forced to surrender. "Yes, Granddaaaad." It is like being in the army, only without the fun of uniforms. Usually their mother deflects the worst of the Ordering About, but she is in hospital having a goitre removed.

"A *what*, Mummy?"

"Goitre." She pointed to her neck. Susan peered. "Yuk." The hospital is half an hour away in Pietermaritzburg, a small city surrounded by hills. Susan loves the drive in, the green of the tree plantations and the quiet slope of the hills towards the town. There is even a game park and sometimes you can spot a zebra or two grazing peacefully just a few hundred metres away from the hurtling traffic. Imogen has been there for a week, and in her absence, their grandparents have assumed Full Responsibility for the Children. Now she has gone and behaved Stupidly and Endangered Herself and Ignored Grandparental Warnings About Sticking One's Nose Where It Doesn't Belong. She is hot and sweaty and the dust in the pipe is making her sneeze. She sniffs irritably. She can feel a Bad Word coming; it is running in at quite a speed. It has a wicked grin on its face and wildly rolling eyeballs. *Say me Say me Say me*. No! *Go on, Say me!* She grimaces, purses her lips together,

scrunches her eyes closed, but the temptation is too much.

“Shit! Shittyshittyshitshit! This is shittycrappybollockspoopoo!”

“Susan Owen! Mind your language!”

The voice is soft but penetrating. It is coming from above her head. She cranes her neck. It doesn’t sound like Granddad.

“Hello?”

“One should never swear in such a way. It is quite unladylike.” The spider descends slowly until she is hanging directly in front of her nose. The girl gulps. A Black Widow.

“You’re speaking.”

“Of course.”

“Like *Charlotte’s Web*?”

“Exactly.”

“Are you a fairy?”

The spider clicks indignantly. “Absolutely not. There are no fairies in Africa. They wouldn’t last five minutes before they were eaten.”

Susan hesitates; she can see she is going to have to be cautious. It would be imprudent to antagonise such a lethal creature.

“But you don’t sound African. You sound English.”

“Well that’s your fault.”

“My fault? What did I do?”

“It’s your imagination. Whatever accent I have is the one you’ve given me.”

She thinks about this. “Oh. That would make sense, I suppose.”

“Naturally.” She drops onto a large piece of tree branch and gives the girl a considering look.

“So do you want to talk about it?”

“About what?”

“About why you’re lying on your stomach in a smelly drainpipe, on a sweltering day in Africa. You should be more careful. There could be any number of deadly surprises down here. Snakes,” her smile reveals a tiny pair of fangs, “spiders.”

Susan isn’t sure she wants to discuss it.

“I’m not sure I want to discuss it.”

“You should. At any rate, you’ve got nothing better to do and as luck would have it, I can hang around for a while.” She giggles at her pun before extending a delicate leg. “Do tell me, dear.”

“Oh all right... it’s Them.”

“Them?”

“You know. The Others.”

“I’m afraid not, dear. You’ll have to be more specific.”

“The other children. They dared me.”

The spider settles down thoughtfully. “I see... carry on...”

The Child’s Survival Guide- Lesson 12: Networking (or How to Make Friends)

This is for you. Yes, YOU, the child who sits alone at break times staring into their lunch box. The one who is always picked last for teams during P.E. The one who spends too much time in the library. An essential weapon in the fight for survival is Social Skill. Knowing how to Network is the difference between popularity and obscurity, coolness and nerdism. The Networker is smoothly charming, effortlessly good-looking and always says The Right Thing at The Right Time.

Here are some Helpful Hints to guide you through the Art of Networking:

- 1) Smile. It is useful to perfect a benevolent beam that inspires trust. Be careful not to show too many teeth. This is merely alarming.*
- 2) Remember people's names. There is nothing quite so belittling as having one's name forgotten. Remembering a name will endear you to its owner and make her less likely to forget yours.*
- 3) Pretend that you're really, really interested. Really. When someone speaks, give him all your attention. You may want to nod your head at intervals and make thoughtful noises such as "Hmmm..." or "Ahhhh..."*

But the most important weapon in the arsenal of the Networker is Confidence. Believe that you can do anything, and everyone else will believe you can too.

She never had trouble making friends before, but her charm doesn't work on the children in this country. Perhaps it has wilted with the heat. She seems unable to understand them; they are too different and have already formed little groups, which resist the inclusion of strangers. She tries, but her outburst on the first day of school doesn't make things any easier. They are like white blood cells repelling foreign anti-bodies. Within three weeks, Sam is moved to another school in Pietermaritzburg. It has a special class for children who are hard of hearing. His uniform is maroon and grey, rather than the green and grey of her own. He catches the bus to school, leaving just as she has begun her breakfast and arriving home late in the afternoon. They have never been separated before and it is an eerie sensation. When they were little, Susan was often the only person who could understand him.

Her mother would turn to her, unable to decipher the garbled language that emerged from his lips, "What does he want, Susie?" Without even a glance at the twist of his face or flush of frustration in his cheeks, she always knew instantly what it was he was trying to say. "He wants you to read him the monster story. He wants a piece of the chocolate cake in the fridge. He wants you to watch him kick his football. He wants..." It seemed natural that she should speak for him and it gave her power. But their twiness is being wedged apart; he has more confidence now that he is away from her. She begins to feel that she is losing him, losing her control over him. This dependency is not one-sided; sometimes it is he who must rescue her. When they were five, their parents took them to Dublin by ferry for Uncle Simon's wedding. The twins had never been on a proper boat before. They clung with awe to the railings as the gloomy expanse of Liverpool diminished before their eyes, Susan's new ShoesForTheWedding squeaking every time she moved. The sea underneath was cold and grey and unimaginably deep, ruffled only by the wake of the ship as it churned along its surface. Leaning against the steel of the railings, she had gazed hypnotised, drawn by the magnetic swirl of tiny waves frothing at the ferry's edges. Were there mermaids swimming sleekly in the depths, their fish scales gleaming? Were there monsters? Enormous sharks with rows of teeth and eight-legged octopuses bigger than buses? She felt a strange urge to jump in and find out. Perhaps, with a flick of an aquamarine tail, she too would become a mermaid and vanish into the mystery of the ocean. Then her stomach lurched, a bitter taste filled her throat and she was vividly sick all over her shoes.

The wedding was in a Catholic church filled almost to bursting with Aunty

Clare's extensive family who jostled and joked in loud Irish accents that made the meagre Anglo-Saxon Owen contingent seem pallid by comparison. Susan wore a pink dress (her shoes had been polished by Andrew so that they shone with a vomit-free sparkle) and Sam a smart collared shirt with trousers that had a crease right down the middle. They fidgeted throughout the entire ceremony, although Aunty Clare did look nice, all white and fluffy like cloud. Their mother explained to them that it was a Mixed Wedding, because Uncle Simon was Protestant and because Aunty Clare had to be granted Special Permission to marry him. Susan wondered what this meant; was it like when you needed to go to the loo and had to get Special Permission from your teacher by putting your hand up? Afterwards there had been a reception and lots of dancing to fiddles and flutes. It seemed there was a special Irish way to dance, which meant flinging your legs up at awkward angles. Susan tried, but her feet got confused and she kept falling over. Some of the adults didn't appear to be able to stand up straight, either. They staggered around cheerfully, the men grabbing the women by their arms, "Dance wit me, darlin'!" It was perilous between all those hot, clumsily swaying bodies and stamping feet. She feared for her toes and retreated to the sides of the hall to be petted by a succession of powdery old women, who told her how pretty she was and her eyes green and almond shaped like a cat's and her nose like a button and wouldn't she like to sing a little tune for them? Usually Susan was not averse to being petted, she liked the attention, but the profusion of flapping handkerchiefs made her claustrophobic. They were like moths, the insubstantial flutter of their lips and fingers leaving traces of silver dust across her cheeks. One was very ancient, and stared unblinkingly at her from a wheelchair.

"Go and say hello te Great-Gran Kathleen. Go on, she'll not bite."

Close up she had a peculiar odour, like clothes that have been packed away and forgotten for years. Her skin was a deeply wrinkled and delicately pale like tissue paper. She looked at Susan out of hooded brown eyes, fingers scrabbling at the material of her skirt. As she opened the gummy cavern of her mouth, Susan saw the pink globule of her tonsil hanging like an upturned horse shoe from the back of her throat and familiar rhyme played in her head,

There was an old lady who swallowed a fly...

I don't know why she swallowed a fly...

Perhaps she'll die.

She couldn't see any flies, but maybe a person did not need to swallow one to die. She knew from Sunday School that death is just like Going Away on a Long Holiday. You pack your suitcase, lock the front door and take an extended visit to Heaven, where hopefully God has stocked up on lots of ice cream and chocolate cake. Great-Gran Kathleen reached up a hooked hand to touch Susan's hair and smiled.

"Unnell", she said gummily. The girl moved away, confused. What language was this?

"Oh," the other women cooed, "she's callin' you an Angel, so she is. What a dear."

They clustered round Susan and kissed her. "Aren't you a lovely wee Angel."

"Yes," she replied. "I am."

Later that night, they drove back to the farm where they were staying and the twins fell asleep on the back seat, still clutching half-eaten pieces of wedding cake. It was a blissful place, with horses and sheepdogs and that

particular farm smell; a warmly reassuring stink. The farmer and his family were hard to understand but wonderful to listen to. Sometimes she felt that if she listened long enough, those voices would rock her to sleep in lilting softness. She liked to wander the farmyard alone during the long dusky summer afternoons, when the grown-ups were napping, clucking at the chickens and patting the furry black and white head of Lulu. It was the dog's fault she got into trouble with the rooster. Susan had followed her to the hen hut and peeked inside the door, "There are eggs in there," she said, licking her canine chops. "You could get me one." She nudged the child with her wet nose. "Go on." Susan chewed her lips doubtfully, "I don't think the hens would like it." The dog wuffed scornfully, "Hens are stupid. They won't even notice." Susan stood on the tips of her toes, trying to see if any eggs were nestled in the straw. Then she heard a ferocious squawk and the rooster came leaping around the corner, comb wobbling with outrage. He chased her round and round the yard while she shrieked, "Help, Lulu, Help!" The dog had merely lain down and rested her head on her paws, watching with quizzical interest as the small girl was pursued by an enraged bird nearly half her size. "Help, help!" she screamed, but no one came and her legs were weakening, the rooster gaining every second. If she really were an Angel, she'd be able to spread her wings and fly away, but she couldn't escape the trap of her human feet beating endless circles in the dirt of the yard. They weighed her down. She would have to run until she dropped and then she'd be pecked to pieces. "YYAAARRGGHHH!" From nowhere, Sam ran yelling towards them and with a hop of alarm, the bird backed away. Clucking grumpily, it shook its wattle before stalking back into the henhouse. Susan collapsed onto the dust and her brother patted her leg. "There, there, Susie. S'all right, I saved you."

They search through their grandmother's collection of *Garden and Home* magazines, cutting out dining room suites and kitchen appliances, queen sized beds with ornate trappings, frilly curtains. They stick them to cardboard and build entire homes. It can take them hours of painstaking effort.

"My sitting room's nicer 'en yours."

"T'isnt."

They are happy constructing tiny nuclear families to live in these houses. Dad, Mum, smiling children. It is normal. It is what Should Be.

"What are you using as your dad?"

He reaches for a toy soldier, "This one."

"But you can't! I want to use him!"

"No, he's my dad!"

"He's mine!"

"He isn't!" she reaches forward and tries to pull the toy away from him.

They tussle, arms and feet flailing. The houses are knocked over. The green soldier lands on his face.

"Now look what you've done!"

"It's not my fault!"

She gets up and runs out of his room, through the dining room, down the passage and into her own. She collapses on the bed and buries her face in the softness of the pillow.

"I want to go home. I want my Dad."

Morning assembly and Susan sits with her hands in her lap. The headmaster is mumbling something about an eye for an eye. He has a stooped posture

and receding grey hair which fails to hide his large pink ears. She thinks that if she had ears that size she might try flapping them like Dumbo and soar through the hall above the heads of gawking children. She would do forward somersaults and back flips in the air before disappearing out of the open double doors into the morning sunshine. She often indulges herself in fantasies of escape. From the desk in her classroom she can look out of the window onto the school gate and road that winds from it, a hot stripe of tarmac disappearing into the hills. She imagines herself leaping up from her desk and speeding faster than a bullet through the door; so fast she is almost a blur. She runs along the cool corridors, down the stairs, past the swimming pool and the tennis courts and then out of the gate. She runs and runs and runs, her legs pumping, hair flung about her face, feet barely touching the road's surface.

A muffled snuffling to her left, the sounds of somebody stifling tears, breaks her reverie. She peers past the girl sitting next to her and identifies the snuffler as Nicola Kalk, a short girl with dark hair and a freckled, pointy nose. No body else in the row appears to be paying much attention. She cries a lot, her sharp little face crumpling like a wet tissue. She arrived over a week ago and has not smiled once. Susan has thought about trying to befriend her but for a reason she cannot define, the girl is unsettling. She is surprised to see Nicola at school. Yesterday she was sick all over Alistair Paterson. Mrs Brooke had been carefully dissecting a long division sum on the black board when there was a volley of gagging noises from the corner of the classroom. Alistair sprang from his chair as if he'd been bitten, his shirt and maths book covered in lumpy brown vomit. The other children gasped with delight at the distraction, before the smell hit them and they turned away holding their noses in disgust. Mrs Brooke calmly sent someone

to fetch the school cleaner before hustling both puker and puked-upon outside. Susan feels a pang of sympathy for the sniffing girl; it is not easy to be new. After they are dismissed from assembly, she follows her down to the line of trees that fringe the rugby field.

“Are you all right?”

“Leave me alone.”

“Why are you crying?”

“Because... I want to go back to my old school.”

Susan kicks at the dirt with her shoe, causing a flurry of dust to whirl and settle. She squints at the other girl under her eyelashes. There is a shadow of something lingering about her sharp features that makes her hesitate. Then she takes a breath and says, “Well, I’m also new. We could be friends...if you like.”

Nicola pauses. Sniffs and wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. “All right.”

(9)

The room smells of too-sweet perfume and talcum powder, tubes of make-up are scattered below a gilded mirror. Nicola rifles through her mother’s drawers, the lacy bras and scanty knickers so different from Susan’s own sensible underwear. She understands that there is an adult intimacy sewn into the satin material, a warm and sticky secrecy to which she does not yet have access. The air is thick and close, the scent of perfume over-powering. “I found them.” Her friend pulls out a piece of black lingerie and a packet of condoms. Susan is not completely naive. She knows what condoms are for;

nonetheless she goggles at the packet in Nicola's hand. It has the words *Rough Rider- Ribbed for Her Pleasure* and an entwined couple on the front. "I want to show you something." Susan follows her into the passage way to another bedroom. Nicola closes the door and locks it; she has a younger brother who is fond of sudden and inconvenient appearances.

"Feel it." The lingerie is silky and slips through Susan's fingers.

"My mom wears that when she goes out sometimes. It makes her boobs stick out like this." She pushes her own minuscule breasts up with her hands and stalks around the room as if in high heels. She pouts and arches her eyebrows. Susan looks away, her discomfort increasing.

"You have to use these when you do It." Nicola sits down next to her and takes a condom from the packet. The silver wrapping tears easily to reveal the slimy yellow rubber inside. Susan wrinkles her nose.

"Ugh. It's revolting." The condom looks like something that has been stepped upon, its insides releasing a repugnant goo, shapeless form hanging pathetically flaccid.

"You put it on like this." She rolls it down over two fingers and makes thrusting gestures.

"Don't."

"Why not? Are you embarrassed? Susie's embarrassed, Susie's embarrassed."

"I'm going home."

"Go then. You're too *immature* for me, anyway."

Susan gets off the bed and walks towards the door. "I'll see you at school on Monday?"

At first Nicola doesn't respond. She puts her pointed nose in the air and says nothing.

“Nicky...?” Her hand hesitates upon the lock.

“Maybe I won’t want to be your friend on Monday.”

For a moment Susan is torn. Then her fingers tighten around the handle.

“I’m going to be late for lunch. Bye.”

Her bicycle is leaning against the front wall of the house. Nicola’s brother is playing marbles on the front lawn and they glitter roundly in the sun.

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

He turns back to his game and she pedals out onto the road, past the suburban houses and well-tended green gardens. She knows that Nicola will not come out after her. It is always Susan who must say sorry first, who must constantly seek approval and favour. As she rides along the tarmac she thinks about Mrs Kalk, who works as a secretary for a law firm in Pietermaritzburg. Since she is hardly ever at home, Susan has met her only a few times but was struck by her bloneness and her smell, the same sensual sweetness that fills her bedroom. Unlike her daughter she is all curves and softness.

“Nicky and James took after their Pa. They’re small and dark like he was.” She always talks about her ex-husband in the past tense as if he were dead, her lips curling with a vague distaste. “Sometimes I look at them and I can’t see anything of myself.” Apart from Susan, Nicola is the only other person in their standard whose parents are divorced. Everybody else comes from neat nuclear families; families who belong to the golf club and play tennis at the weekends, their tanned legs flashing as they run to smash balls she will never be able to hit. She feels her difference as though it were a large sign hanging right over her heart. Perhaps this is why she has chosen Nicola, who also does not fit in. But her edges are sharper than Susan’s, and they can cut

if you aren't careful.

When she gets home her grandfather is working in his vegetable garden. "Hello, my girl. Go inside and wash your hands. You're just in time for lunch and there are some mielies for you." Lunch is always served at exactly one o' clock, the large table set with salads and cold meat. Her grandparents have peculiar culinary tastes. They eat maas, soured farm milk, which they keep in containers on top of the fridge. As the days pass it froths and ^{gargles} ~~bubbles~~ like a mutant life form, pushing up against the lid with fat pale bubbles that dribble down the sides of the bucket. Only then do they take it down and eat it with brown sugar, their lips smacking against their spoons with a relish she finds incomprehensible. But mielies are delicious, *lekker*. They are Granddad's proudest achievement in a garden already dense with vegetables; carrots, cabbages, lettuces, tomatoes, onions, beans and radishes all compete for space and attention. Yet they fade in comparison to the mielies, which are the undisputed stars of the vegetable parade, their golden nubs like perfectly formed rows of tiny corn teeth. As soon as the stalks show signs of beginning to bulge, he wraps each leaf covered cob with wire to save it from rodents and birds. The milky kernels nestle in chrysalises of green until they are ripe and ready to be picked. Afterwards they are boiled to tenderness and served with butter and salt, their surfaces glistening and wonderfully hot. Susan loves to eat straight from the cob, her front teeth gnawing like a rabbit's and her chin greasy with butter. She goes inside and quickly rinses her hands in the bathroom sink. Granny, Mum and Sam are already waiting. Susan sits down and puts her napkin on her lap, careful to keep her elbows at her side; it is forbidden to lean them on the table. Granddad comes through and rubs his hands together in anticipation.

“There were some large ones in this lot. Has Grace finished boiling them?” Granny rings the little silver bell next to her plate. *Tinkletinkletinkle*. There are sounds from the kitchen and approaching footsteps before Grace pushes the double doors open with her foot, the tray she is carrying loaded with a pile of mielies. She sets the plate down and bustles out again, her large bottom swaying under the yellow of her uniform. Susan is still unsure of the dynamics of Grace’s position in their house. She is not comfortable with the idea of servants; it fills her with a sense of awkwardness. She cannot deny the convenience, but she feels guilty, almost furtive. Sometimes she is unable to look Grace in the eye. Her grandparents employ an entire battalion of uniformed women. There is one who does the gardening twice a week, another who comes in on Mondays and Wednesdays to do the ironing, someone else who arrives intermittently to polish silver and clean windows and Grace, who has a small room and bathroom at the bottom of the property. She is called a *live-in-maid* and is her grandparent’s third in three months. The first was addicted to methylated spirits and lasted a week, the second was a member of the ANC and considered to have too much attitude. Granny dismissed her after nearly a month.

“Why these people think they know anything about politics or how to run a country is beyond me. Honestly, it’s *absurd*.”

Susan wonders about the place where Grace actually lives, the township where her real home and children are. Every Friday evening she balances a packed bag on top of her head to leave for that unseen home, and every Sunday evening she returns, sometimes trailing a young child who ducks shyly behind her. He rarely stays for long, a night or two at the most, before disappearing back to wherever it was he came from. She would try to talk to him, but she doesn’t know the words. Instead she just watches him from the

dining room window, a slight figure lingering close to the bulk of his mother. She is a cheerful, smiling woman but in fact Susan knows nothing about her. She doesn't even know her Zulu name.

"They're a suspicious people, the Zulus," says her grandfather. "And aggressive. Nothing like the Shona in Rhodesia. Now those were decent Africans." (Her grandparents don't call themselves African. They are European. Europeans who live in Africa.)

"Take Grace, for example. Did you know she puts bricks under bed posts so that the tokolshe won't be able to reach her at night?"

"The what?"

"The tokolshe. A little green man-monster with human intestines wrapped around his waist. He's so short that he can't get at someone whose bed posts have been raised."

"And what happens if he can get at them?"

"Oh, all sorts of nasty and unspeakable things." She would like to tell Grace that she knows what it is like to see things others can't, but once more she finds herself prohibited by a lack of words. All she does is to thank her in awkward Zulu.

"Ngiya bonga, Grace. Nande ngudla. The mielies were muhle. They were very nice."

"Jaaa," she replies with a broad grin, "Jaaa, Susan."

After lunch, she goes to her room to write letters. They are the only contact she has with her friends. She draws little Union Jacks on the corners of the envelopes to emphasise that she is still English, that she does not belong here at the end of an unfamiliar continent. *I miss you lots*, she writes, *I will see you soon*. She is comic and entertaining in these letters, penciling in

cartoons and funny faces. She does not say *I am unhappy*. On her desk is an envelope from her father. She takes it to her bed and opens it for the fourth time that weekend.

Dear Susie

It is raining here today and you must feel very lucky to be in South Africa, where it is probably sunny. I have found a flat in London, in an area called Bayswater. I have only a large room, a kitchen and a bathroom, but the building is very attractive and I am looking forward to moving in. When you are next in England you and Sam will be able to stay with me...

She picks up the photo on her bedside table, one of the three of them sitting on a hill under a grey sky. It was taken on a visit to one of the stately manor houses that dot the English countryside. Houses surrounded by fantastic gardens as signatures of wealth that had become burdens to their owners, too expensive to maintain in the harsher modern climate. It was desperate necessity that threw the doors open to the general public, the masses against whom they had once been so forcefully closed. Susan remembers the enormity of the rooms and the height of the ceilings, walls covered in paintings of stiffly posed aristocrats. She thought then how miserable it must be to live in such lofty, cold spaces. No wonder the people in the paintings were so unsmiling. Later they walked through the huge gardens, beautiful but somehow also tragic, the lakes still and the distant deer leaping away in alarm at the slightest human intrusion. There was a sadness to the place that had made her quiet. The other sightseers tamping round them couldn't feel it or sense the ghosts moving ^{silently} ~~with melancholic silence~~ through the ~~cool~~ autumn air. She grew quieter and quieter until her father said, "What's

wrong, Susan? You're not sulking are you?"

"She's just thinking about things, aren't you Susie?" Lisa smiled kindly at her, her large blue eyes soft. "I can also feel that there's a lot to think about here."

It was the first time she let her father's girlfriend hold her hand, had relaxed upon her lap and leant her head on her shoulder. It was the first time she allowed herself to feel affection for Lisa, whom she had regarded only as a threat. The first time she began to accept that her parents were likely to remain separated. Holding the photo she regrets that Lisa is not in it. By the time they left England, she had started to love her and now she does not know when she will see her again. Her father's move to London is also a move away from his ex-girlfriend.

She knows so little about the relationships between adults. When Nicola was searching for condoms in her mother's drawer, Susan caught a glimpse of a black and white photo of a young man with straight dark hair hidden beneath the layers of clothing. She wonders if it is the absent Mr Kalk and why Mrs Kalk has kept this picture of him, tucked away where it cannot be seen unless you are looking for it. Is she lonely? Does she take the photo out at night to remember him? She thinks about her own mother and the boy she left behind in Durban years ago when she was sixteen. If she had married Adam, Susan would not be here now, sitting on her bed and reading letters. "Why was he so mean to you?" She had asked as Imogen closed the photo album.

"He was afraid. He proposed when he was drunk and I suppose the next day he just didn't know how to deal with it. Or how to deal with me."

"Well, I think he was stupid."

"Not stupid. Just very young."

"Did you ever hear from him again?"

"He wrote me a letter about a year later. He'd joined the South African navy and his ship was docked in New York harbour. He said that I had been much too good for him and that if I would like to write back, he would very much like to hear from me."

"And did you?"

"No. Your grandmother advised me not to. She told me he probably didn't know anyone in New York and was just bored."

"Oh." This sounds like something Granny would say. "What do you think?"

"I think he felt guilty. He handled things very badly." She sighed, "One shouldn't re-establish a friendship or relationship on the basis of guilt. It just isn't..." she pauses, "...it isn't a good idea."

Susan watched her mother's slender fingers as they played unconsciously with the album's edges. "Tell me again how you met Dad, Mummy."

"Oh, Susie..."

"Please?" The accidental meeting of her parents is one of her favourite stories; it is so filled with potential. In the moment they see each other, anything can happen. The end has not yet been decided. She prompted her mother gently, "You went to visit Aunty Anne..."

"We were best friends in Sixth Form and writing A levels at the time. Our exam was only at nine but your Granddad insisted upon leaving the house at the ungodly hour of seven o' clock, because that was when he started his day. He dropped me off at the Owens', since they lived just down the road from the school and I could walk in with Anne. I hadn't slept well the night before so I stood for a bit outside their house to let the morning air clear my head. It was still cool and fresh; you know how it is that early, before it gets hot. I felt as if everything I could or could not be was contained within me at

that instant, my past, present and future all compressed in the singing of the birds and the breeze on my skin..."

"Yes, yes, Mummy. Don't be silly." Susan doesn't want poetics, she wants Action. "So you were standing there and then what happened?"

"I heard noises above my head, so I looked up and there was this stripy blue bottom hanging over the window sill. Then an arm appeared, and a leg ending in a slippered foot. The arm reached for a tree branch and swung its owner onto the tree and he climbed down."

"And it was Dad."

"It was."

"In his pyjamas."

"Yes. He'd somehow managed to lock himself into the bathroom and the only way he could think of to get out was through the window. He was very embarrassed, his face turned bright red." Imogen remembered the way he had smiled at her and politely introduced himself as *Andrew, Anne's older brother*. His hair was dark blonde and curly, hanging in ringlets almost down to his shoulders and framing the morning blue of his eyes.

"So his bottom was the first thing I ever saw of your Dad, although the rest of him turned out to be rather dishy, too."

"Dishy," ^{repeated} ~~says~~ Susan. Dishy like plates being soaped in washing up liquid? Was he all squeaky clean and shiny? Did a burst of rainbow-tinted bubbles explode from her father's mouth as he began to speak?

"He went back to university in South Africa, of course, so I didn't see him again for a while, but that was the beginning."

The beginning of me, thinks Susan. And Sam. She puts the photograph of her father back on her bedside table. A beginning and an ending.

(10)

The Child's Survival Guide- Lesson 13: The Forbidden

It is true that forbidden fruit is the sweetest. Just be careful you don't get indigestion.

At school, Nicola is curt for a whole two weeks but Susan barely notices. Her mother is ill and has had to go to hospital. She has a lump on her neck called a goitre which the doctor says must be removed. Susan does not like doctors; they are always prodding and poking and jabbing with sharp needles. She remembers having to have injections in her bottom when she was little, a nurse holding her down as she wailed and an ominous figure in a white coat approached, "It won't hurt." Naturally this was a lie. It always hurt. Even the sweets her mother bought her afterwards did nothing to mute the pain and humiliation. Doctors are not to be trusted and dentists are almost as bad. At least she gets to have laughing gas when she goes to the dentist. It is wonderful to have feel your head fill with lightness, it makes you all floaty. Although your eyes are closed, you can still see the dentist and your mother, leaning over you with concern. You can even hear them. "That's a good girl, almost done." They sound ridiculous, like squeaking mice, and have tiny bodies with enormous heads that wobble like balloons on their scrawny shoulders. Ha, ha, you think. Ha ha ha. But Granny is

doctor addicted. She complains constantly of headaches and dizziness and lack of sleep. Granddad drives her at least three times a month to the local medical centre and she comes back loaded with pills. Pills for after breakfast. Pills to take with lunch. Pills swallowed during dinner. The house is awash with vials of pills; green, red, brown. Susan watches her take them with her tea. She shakes them out onto her creased palm where they lie like beads or drops of blood, and counts them carefully. "One, two, three..." Sometimes she forgets which she has had and which she hasn't. Then there is much Consternation and Wringing of Hands. It would not do to take too many pills, but neither would it do to take too few. Susan watches and hopes that she never grows old; or at least not her grandmother's kind of old. She would like to be like Granddad, who strides around briskly and goes for walks every day. When her mother fell ill, she was shaken. Mummies are not supposed to get sick, it is not good for their children. She and Sam accompanied her to the hospital, Granddad driving with his usual upright earnestness. The hospital itself was immense and grey coloured, looming squatly on a rise above the rest of the city. Susan hated leaving her mother there; the ammonia smell of the endless dreary corridors filled her with a familiar foreboding. She was afraid she might never see her again. Her absence means the twins have been left to the mercy of their grandparents and Susan is soon to disgrace herself.

Friday afternoons are spent at the library, choosing books for the weekend. Susan adores books and everything about them. Their smell when you open them, the weight of the pages in your hands. They are perfect refuges to escape into because they allow her to step out of her own life and into an entirely separate reality. She has already worked her way through most of the children's section and is starting to tire of ballet and horse books. It is the

adult ones she is really interested in. She wanders through shelves bearing Dickens, Austen, the Brontes, and longingly runs her hand across their spines. The shelves are higher here, and some of them are beyond the reach of her straining fingertips. What worlds revolve between those covers? What secrets are there to be unearthed? Soon she will be eleven and maybe then she'll risk a plunge into the words of grown-ups. Sighing with resignation, she invariably picks another story about pony-tailed girls who ride in gymkhanas and gets it stamped at the front desk. Her grandfather takes out a book by Roald Dahl. She cranes forward from the back seat of the car to see the front cover. She has read almost everything he has written. She can recite chunks of *The Twits* and *The BFG* of by heart, is enraptured by his tales of witches and chocolate factories inhabited by miniature people.

"May I read it, Granddad?"

He purses his lips together. "We'll see. I'm not sure it will be Suitable." There are many things, which are not deemed Suitable; these include late night viewing, magazines kept on the top shelves in newsagents, cheap romance novellas and soap operas. Roald Dahl has never been on the list. She considers the back of his head carefully. Parted neatly to one side, his hair is thick despite his age and there are glints of black beneath the grey. The skin on his neck is pink and wrinkled above his collar, shirt ironed into precise creases. He wears his socks pulled up to the knee which must be hot in this weather. On the rare occasion that a sock should slip, the flesh underneath, pale like the underside of a fish, reveals itself whitely against the tan of his knees and upper thighs.

"Why?"

"Because I say so."

This is a typical and unsatisfactory response, but she knows that to pursue

the line of questioning would be to invite Grandparental Irritation. All weekend she hovers at the peripheries of Granddad's vision, trying to get a peek at whatever is so forbidden on those innocuous-looking pages. But her grandfather does not finish the book. He does not even make it half way through.

"Disgusting." He says. "Shameful." He puts it on top of the bookcase in the passage where it is to wait until next Friday and a return to the library.

"Susan. Samuel. I do not want you to read this smutty rubbish. Do you understand? No one is to touch it."

The twins nod, their eyes covertly raking the cover. "Yes, Granddad." And there it remains, perched on a tattered copy of Churchill's *My Early Life*. Susan knows this is a test of obedience, but every time she passes the bookcase, (which is often, because it is almost right outside her bedroom), she has to resist the urge to sneak a look. Curiosity gnaws at her whenever she glances at its fat spine and well-thumbed pages. What is in there that is so bad? That is so smutty? She repeats the word to herself; *smutty*. It is probably how Granny would describe Mrs Kalk. Smut is cheap, it is rude, it is common. It is irresistible.

She waits until they have gone to bed. They retire early, but take longer to get to sleep. She hears them squabbling from her room.

"His name was Charles."

"No, it was Ian."

"I distinctly remember it as Charles."

"I'm telling you, Edward, his name was Ian!"

Usually Granddad capitulates in these arguments. He sighs wearily. "All right then, have it your way."

"It's not *my way*. It's fact!"

"Fine, dear."

There are some muffled grumblings followed by the click of bedside lamps being switched off. Then Granddad blows his nose monumentally, louder than a foghorn. There are a number of stories surrounding the ear-splitting volume of his nostril-clearances. When Imogen was sixteen, her parents forced her to take extra lessons in Latin after dismal performances at school. Miss Griggs the Latin teacher was a thin, neurotic woman, given to facial tics and nervous hand gestures, who lived on the outskirts of Salisbury. The bush panted and glared at the edges of her neat little garden and she was forever watching it out the corner of a timid eyeball, as though she expected something wild and roaring to come leaping out of its tangled embrace. Granddad waited for the hour of his daughter's lesson parked outside the house in his worn-out Mercedes, reading or marking papers. Struggling through the conjugation of verbs during her third lesson, Imogen had felt about ready to expire from tedium when there was a deafening bellow close to the open window. Miss Griggs emitted a penetrating scream and jumped from the table. "Lions, dear God! It's a lion!"

"It's not a lion," said her pupil, smiling calmly, "it's just my Dad blowing his nose."

Both her grandparents use handkerchiefs rather than tissues, which Susan finds disgusting, although she would never dare to say so. They think tissues are a waste of money; Kleenex the invention of a consumerist devil. Granny boils the hankies on the stove and the mere thought of all that Grandparental snot wriggling away like so many maggots in the steaming water is enough to make Susan feel quite ill. She tries not to think about it and after a while the sound of snoring reaches her. Lifting up her blanket, she sneaks

stealthily across her room and into the passage, sleek as a cat in her black body suit. She presses herself against the wall and checks the floor for laser beams. All clear. With whip-like reflexes, she somersaults towards the bookcase to foil the movement detectors. Pirouetting as she lands, she covers the lens of a nearby camera with spray. She balances on the toes of her left foot, and with ball of her right pressed against the calf of the opposite leg, carefully lifts the glass case protecting the book, which glows with smutty satisfaction in the dark. It says, *I've been waiting for you. Ree read meee.* Susan picks it up, simultaneously replacing it with another of the same weight. This must be done with painstaking caution, because the alarm will go off should the sensors detect any change in pressure. She can feel the sweat collecting under her balaclava and her breathing is laboured. With agonisingly slow movements, she returns the glass case to its original position and back flips away from the bookcase. She has almost reached the safe zone when her right foot slips and she stumbles. Instantly an alarm begins to blare. Red lights flash. She leaps into her bedroom and dives under the blankets. Waits with a thudding heart. Nothing happens. The guards must be so deeply asleep they didn't hear the commotion. She allows herself to exhale in relief. Mission accomplished.

She takes a small torch (one of last year's Christmas stocking presents) out from where she has hidden it under her sheet and opens the book breathlessly to the first page. Details, details, blah, blah. She scans the words impatiently. Where is the smut? She pages forwards and backwards, searching for any phrase remotely Unsuitable. After a few seconds of flipping her eyes catch upon a sentence and then widen as she reads on. A sensation of shame begins to twitch at her toes and travels in a guilty flush along the entire length of her body until she can feel her cheeks turn crimson

in the darkness and snaps the book shut. Her eyeballs are tingling with the information she has just absorbed. Is *that* how they do It? She must read further. No, she mustn't- it is depraved! Briefly she battles with her conscience but curiosity wins out, as always. Gingerly, she turns back to the offending page and continues where she had stopped. She reads and reads, her mind boggling, her brow creasing with surprise and distaste. This is not the Roald Dahl she knows. More than ever, she cannot understand Nicola's impatience to be a grown-up. It is such a treacherous, slippery world, full of lies and lust and unpleasant bodily secretions. Susan wants to stay ten forever, safe in the androgyny of her skinny torso and knobbly knees. Suddenly she is overcome with tiredness and the possible agonies of adulthood that await her. She lets her eyelids droop and the book slips from her fingers to hit the floor with a dull thud.

"Susan Owen!" Someone is shaking her by the shoulders. "Wake up!" She rubs her eyes blearily and focuses on the irate form of her grandfather. He is holding something in his hand. It is book-shaped.

"Susan Owen! What was this doing by your bed?"

"Um...I was just looking at it."

"Just looking at it! You were told not to touch it!"

Susan groans. It is too early to be interrogated. Her brain flops sluggishly inside her skull. "Um..."

"You are not to disobey your elders, do you understand?"

"Yes, Granddad."

"You are not to behave deceitfully, do you understand?"

"Yes, Granddad."

"Now get up and get dressed. You're going to be late for school."

“Yes, Granddad.”

She slides out of bed and struggles into her uniform, pulling the green tunic over her head and buckling brown shoes over her white socks. Now she must endure the ordeal of breakfast. The sun is still gentle this early in the morning, and it illuminates the house with bright pools of light spilling through the kitchen’s brocade curtains.

“Sawubona, Grace.”

“Yebo, sawubona.”

She ladles thick porridge into a bowl and trudges through to the dining room. In England, they ate cereal from boxes, but her grandparents insist upon the lumpy brown maltabela that sets within seconds of touching the bowl. Its stubborn surface rejects milk, which splatters onto the tablecloth in creamy little lumps. You have to dig a hole in the corner with your spoon and pour the milk in that way, so it circles the brown in a rim of yellow. Susan dislikes porridge, heavy and hot down her throat, but it is better than what she has to eat for supper. Boiled cabbage, pork chops so welded into their jelly-like gravy that they have to be pried out with loud sucking sounds. Chicken livers which she refuses to touch because their iron-blood taste on her tongue makes her gag. The only part of dinner she enjoys is the mashed potato she heaps onto her plate and eats with butter, and the jelly for dessert. Bold green, red or orange and covered with cream, she likes to prod it with her finger and watch it wobble.

At the table, the spinal column of Granddad is ramrod straight over his breakfast bowl, spoon clacking faintly against his false teeth. She sits down timidly because she can almost see the anger radiating off him as if it were bright red waves pulsing from his brow. His sharp blue eyes flicker over her before returning to the view through the window. From his position at the

head of the table, he looks out onto the rise of green hills blanketed with pine forests and caressed by the pale morning sky.

“You are to be docked two weeks worth of pocket money.”

“Yes, Granddad.” They eat in silence and then he pushes his chair back. “I’ll see you at the car.”

Susan finishes her porridge, her feet tucked under her seat. She is afraid of her grandfather and his lightning bolt temper. She has never known anyone quite so intimidating. When he was young, living with his parents and three sisters in Durban, he was continually getting into fights with boys far bigger than he, staggering home with a black eye and a broken tooth or two. His mother would bathe his face in salt water and wonder at the fierce spark in her son, so clever he had skipped two years of school yet always holding himself apart from the other children, blue eyes quick under his black hair. One hot afternoon in November, his sister Polly turned the hose on him, spraying him relentlessly while he shouted, following him with a jet of water wherever he ran. When she finally stopped, weak with laughter, he grabbed his father’s axe from where it lay next to the woodpile and chased her round the garden. He had been so filled with fury that it was only when his father hauled him back by his shirt and smacked him across the face that the violence left him, and he stood staring at the axe in his hands as if he had just woken from some awful and bewildering nightmare.

The Child’s Survival Guide-Lesson 14: Dares

Always a tricky scenario, there is no standard approach to the dilemma of Being Dared. Refuse, and one risks ridicule. Accept, and one may risk

personal injury or worse. Our advice is to tackle the problem pragmatically; weigh the consequences carefully against the need to maintain your reputation. If the risk of the outcome is too great, i.e. life threatening, decline. This ought to be done with flair and derision. If one is going to turn the darer down, one must do so in a way, which makes him or her appear inferior. However, if the dare is within your limits and is unlikely to result in the loss of any major body parts, accept. It will do your street cred no end of good.

The note is folded into a neat rectangle. She opens it on her lap so the teacher won't be able to see and reads,

What is your problem? I don't even know why I bother being your friend. You are so immature. If you want me to give you another chance, meet me at the bottom of your road at half past three.

Nicky

She has underlined her name with scroll and a carefully drawn flower. Susan looks over to where her friend is sitting, but she is facing the board as if in rapt attention, so she slides the paper under her text book. They are learning about the murder of Voortrekker leaders Piet Retief and Gert Maritz, lured by the Zulu chief Dingane onto a hilltop and stabbed to death with assegais. It is a gruesome history. Rivers run with blood, grassy plains are coated with a dried crust of gore. The English fight the Boers, who fight the Zulus who fight the English.

(Point to Ponder: According to Susan's text book, history in South Africa only really began in 1652, with the arrival of the Dutch East India Company at the Cape of Good Hope. Its disgruntled employee, a heavily mustachioed Jan Van Riebeeck, cleared the bush for vegetable gardens, battled the ungrateful locals and would one day lend his face to the two rand note. Before the plant of that first colonising foot there was apparently no history, just wilderness. Herds of thundering elephants, yellow coated lions and the occasional native, bag-bellied and bow-legged; barely human. It was easy shout a history over this wild silence, to stamp it down with the ponderous weight of a European boot. Except that the boot could not settle, it had disagreements with its other half; which would keep following it wherever it went. In the 1830's, the Dutch Voortrekkers left the Cape after its British rulers abolished slavery, only to find that they were pursued by the other foot, which smelt a little too strongly of Rule Britannia.)

Susan has already learnt about the Great Trek and watched videos on the Voortrekkers, dour men and women who don't say much. They travel in wagons drawn by long-horned cattle through dusty brown landscapes which must have made them nervous because nobody ever smiles. Once in a while someone will manage a few words of clipped Dutch (made understandable by sub-titles), but generally it is a gloomy, silent journey. It is as if the trekkers are oppressed by their own expectations and the heat trapped under their thick dark clothes. She always finds the videos extremely depressing, the endless weary trudge of those god-fearing feet and morose faces apparently untouched by laughter. There are films about Zulus too, which are more exciting. They start with booming music like the throbbing of a heartbeat, set against flame-coloured sunrises and the glint of a thousand

assegais. Here are the British, their cheerful red uniforms matching their heat flushed cheeks. They stand out like bright lollipops against the green and brown of the surrounding landscape. Despite the weather, the officers drink tea while the hills glower over them, their moustaches moist with sweat. Here are the Zulus, marauding down the hills in a fearsome wave of blackness, impolite enough to skewer their opponents when they have barely had time to finish their cups of Earl Grey. She always sides with the British in these films. You are persuaded to sympathise with them, are introduced to individual characters whose heroism must be admired. You laugh at their jokes, you tremble when they tremble. The Zulus are merely a mass of indistinguishable, yelling faces. They are alien to you. They are frightening. Besides, it is clear that they will lose in the end. The triumph of Isandlwana is followed by their defeat at Rourke's Drift, those brave Brits once again doing it for Queen and Country. Up the Empire, you are encouraged to think, and serve the Zulus right for being so *beastly*. Don't they know what's good for them?

By half past three the air sags with the day's heat. A thick stillness hangs after Susan's footsteps as she walks down her road, the slap of her slip-slops on tarmac the only noise to break the quiet, apart from the occasional chirrup of a cricket. She has been able to sneak out undetected because it is that time of day when the world withdraws into sleepy silence. Every afternoon, her grandparents retreat to their bedroom for a nap, "Winston Churchill," says Granddad, "Could survive on only four hours sleep a night provided he had an hour's shut-eye after lunch." He is an admirer of the rotund war leader, who was great before Rhodesia's U.D.I. in 1965 and before Britain *sold us down the river*. (Susan has often wondered what this phrase means. Did

Britain push Rhodesia into the river? Did it try to drown it? She imagines the small green tip of the United Kingdom booting its pink-coloured ex-colony into an immense expanse of water, down which it floats haplessly, a large *Sold* sign plastered to its front.) She crept around the house for a while before peeking through their door to check it was safe to leave. They looked vulnerable without their false teeth, which they keep in plastic containers next to their beds. Without the stoic rigidity of teeth to hold them up, their faces had crumpled and she realised for the first time that they are actually very old. Her grandfather's large hands lay blue-veined and weathered upon his barely moving chest, so still that for a horrible moment she almost believed he was dead. She had a fleeting premonition that this is how she will find him when he dies, the same quiet lines set in his skin, the touch of death in the collapsed resignation of his body. Then a whistle of sound escaped his nose and she shook her head, slipped down the passage and out of the house.

Nicola has not come alone. Beside her is Jason Simmons, a blonde boy from their class with a square-shaped head and glasses too big for his face.

"What's he doing here?"

"He's my boyfriend."

"Oh." She didn't notice Nicola had acquired a boyfriend.

"You have an attitude problem, Susan."

"Why?"

"Because you think you're better than everyone else."

"No, I don't."

"Ja, you do." This is Jason. Susan scowls at him. She has come here at considerable personal risk. If the grandparents discover she is gone, they will

have her hide.

"I can't stay long. I'm in trouble already."

"Oooh, Susie's in *trouble*. What did you do? Forget to say please when you asked for the salt?"

"No." She is beginning to feel upset. There are tears forming in the corners of her eyes and she hurriedly blinks them away "No. What do you want?"

"I want you to prove you're my friend." At that moment a school bus comes shuddering up the road. It deposits a small figure and grinds on, belching nasty smelling fumes from its rear. The figure heaves a rucksack up onto its shoulders and begins to walk towards them. It is Sam. She forgot that he arrives home early on Wednesdays.

"Susie, what are you doing here?"

"Nothing."

"Oh look, it's her dorky brother. Hello, dorkus."

"Shut-up, Paul." Nicola turns on him with surprising venom. "You don't know what you're talking about." She leans forward, her voice wheedling, "Susie, I want you to be my friend, but lately you've been acting funny. Like I'm not good enough for you."

"But you are."

"So then prove it. I dare you."

"Dare me to do what?"

"I dare you to..." she pauses, "I dare you to crawl through the storm drain, from one end to the other."

The idea is spectacularly silly. "You want me to crawl through the storm drain to prove I'm your friend?"

"I dare you to. Or are you chicken?"

"No, but it's just so...so..."

“Stupid.” Sam’s voice pipes up with quick scorn. They are all startled by the vehemence penetrating his usual shyness. He blushes and turns away.

“You’ll get into trouble. Granny and Granddad told us to stay away from the drains. There’s snakes down there. And spiders.”

“Are you going to do it or are you scared? We’ll tell everyone at school what a chicken you are. They all think you’re a Pommy snob anyway. ”

Susan hesitates. She knows that Sam is right. The dare is ridiculous, but she is filled with a compulsion to prove herself. A familiar stubbornness sets her jaw rigid.

“Fine. I’ll do it. I’m not scared.”

“Susie!” She shoots her brother a warning glare. “Shut-up.” The opening of the storm drain is framed prettily by tiny flowers gleaming whitely amidst the grass, more lush than anywhere else along the roadside. It is the kind of scene in which she might have expected to find fairies, except for the yawning dark hole at its centre. She gets down onto her hands and knees and peers uncertainly into the gloom. She can see nothing but the vague outlines of what appear to be piles of leaves and sticks and a musty, damp smell wisps past her nose as she crawls forwards. Nicola and Paul watch silently but Sam dashes over and grabs her by the ankle, “Don’t be stupid!” She shakes him off. “Go away!” The drain is too low for her to fit without getting onto her stomach. She will have to slither along like a snake, dragging herself forward by her elbows. At the other end she can discern a small circle of light. “S’not *that* far,” she thinks, her heart pounding a gentle apprehension against her rib cage. “I can make it.”

The Child's Survival Guide-Lesson 15: How to Accept Defeat

One cannot expect to win all the battles in one's life, and the next best thing to winning is knowing how to be gracious in defeat. It is vulgar to fling a tennis racket after the fashion of John MacEnroe or to hurl oneself upon the ground in a temper tantrum. Dignity is the key element to maintaining one's self-respect in any losing situation. Look your opponent square in the eye, shake their hand, say something sportsmanlike... and stamp on their foot.

"Which is how you came to be stuck."

"Yes."

The spider caresses a fang thoughtfully. "You're not very *bright*, are you dear."

"Excuse me?" Susan squeaks indignantly. "I am too. My teacher says I am bright as a button."

"Really? Having never conversed with a button, let alone a bright one, I suppose I wouldn't know. Still, you seem to have behaved with singular stupidity. Yes?"

The girl splutters, "I...you...yes."

"As far as I've been able to gather, there is sufficient stupidity in the world without your adding to it."

Susan is abashed. "I just wanted to show them I wasn't afraid. That I...you know."

"Indeed, I do not. Enlighten me."

"That I have... that I can control what happens to me."

"My dear girl, *no one* has control over everything that happens to them, but

at least one can choose to act with intelligence. There are other ways to prove one's worthiness than sliding along on one's belly through a dirty drain. Most undignified. And honestly, if you value the opinion of that silly girl so highly, you might remember that she made herself scarce the instant you appeared to be in trouble. The people one chooses to fraternise with says a lot about how highly one values *oneself*."

"Yes, but..."

"Don't interrupt! It's *such* bad manners. I think it clear you need to learn a little stoicism. Sometimes in life, one must simply grit one's teeth and get on with the task of living. I myself have raised hundreds of children, outlasted numerous husbands (there is nothing quite so tasty as a plump, juicy husband, my dear) and survived several attempts upon my life. I see you widen your eyes, but the world is not a hospitable place for a spider such as myself. I have been sprayed with insecticides, swatted at with newspapers, stamped upon with shoes. Unappreciated and unloved." She sniffs reproachfully.

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Well, it's not your fault. You're very young after all, little more than an egg."

From the near distance comes the loud thump of approaching footsteps. The spider raises her head nervously. "I really ought to be off. Remember what I told you dear, and be careful where you tread!"

She swings rapidly away on silvery thread of web.

"Come back," Susan calls after her. "Don't leave me here."

"Susan!" She can't see his face, but the voice is unmistakable.

"Susan Owen, you *stupid* girl!" A long arm grasps her by her left calf and pulls.

“Ow!”

“Wriggle!”

“I can’t, Granddad!”

“Of course you can. Wriggle!” She does as she is told, squirming from left to right, writhing like an earthworm stranded under a hot sun. There is another pull so strong she is afraid her leg will be ripped off when with a sudden pop, the sides of the drain release her and she feels herself being hauled backwards. Her grandfather drags her out ankles first and she squints as the afternoon light touches her face.

“You’re filthy.” She looks down. Her t-shirt and shorts are covered in brown dirt. There are twigs in her hair and her knees are scraped. A thin cut snakes down her right forearm. She dare not meet his eye.

“I expect to see you at the house in less than five minutes. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Granddad.” With a swift turn, he walks back up the road and disappears from view around a corner. Sam helps her up.

“What did you have to tell him for?”

“You were stuck.”

“So?!” She’d rather have remained trapped indefinitely in the drain than face whatever is waiting for her at home. Briefly, she imagines herself running away. She could hitch a lift from a kind passer-by to Durban and stow away on a boat back to England. Maybe the ship’s captain would discover her and make her a cabin boy. She could even learn how to sail and to fight pirates. The fantasy passes. It is no use; she will have to go home.

“Come on then, if we take any longer I’ll just get into more trouble.”

Together they plod up the incline of the road. It seems like the longest walk of Susan’s life.

Granddad waits on the veranda. "Go inside, Samuel. Susan, come here." She approaches cautiously. "You have been an extremely naughty little girl. Your grandmother and I are responsible for you whilst your mother is in hospital and I will not have you behaving so stupidly! I told you to stay away from the drains, heaven knows what might have happened to you!" There is a large vein throbbing in his forehead. She tries not to stare at it.

"Bend over."

"Pardon?"

"I said, bend over, my girl!"

He smacks her bottom hard five times with back of his hand. She has never been hit before and begins to cry more from shock than pain. "It's for your own good." At school, boys are punished by getting *jacks*; swift canings to the backside. They always return full of smugness and bravado, as if being beaten is proof of manliness. Susan does not feel smug; she feels humiliated. He does not have to tell her to go to her room; she scuttles off as soon as he has finished, her face smarting with shame. She scrunches up tightly as she can manage; her chin pressed against her knees, and curls her fists into hot ~~balls~~ balls of resentment. Her bottom stings as if it has been pierced with hundreds of little pins and she pulls down her shorts and knickers, twisting her torso to see the skin alive with bright red marks. If only I were a witch, she thinks, I would cast a spell and turn them all into toads, every last single one! Her lungs are on fire with outraged indignation and her breath comes in shallow gasps. So unfair! Her fury lessens at the vision of her grandparents hopping slimily around the house with plaintive croaks. Then she could keep them in a big tank and feed them worms. "Here's a nice fat one for you, Granddad. And I've got a blue-bottle fly for you, Granny." The image makes

her giggle. Lying on her back, she closes her eyes and lets a sensation of detachment drift across her body. She is a cowgirl storming across a plain on her Palamino stallion. Thundering hooves drum up dust from the dry earth as she leans forward in the saddle, blonde hair streaming long and wild under her Stetson. Or perhaps she is a medieval princess treading quietly through the chill-laden spaces of a castle. These fantasies are so real she can almost taste the sparse Texan air, feel the rough edges of the castle walls under her fingertips. She sinks deeper into dream, lost in the slow pulsing of her breathing. With a start she opens her eyes and reminds herself that she is just Susan Owen. Ten years old and recently spanked. She gets up and walks over to the mirror. Her face is stained with tear streaks, there are grubby marks on her nose and cheeks from where she had brushed up against the drain. Granny does not like her to look in the mirror. She says it is vanity. "Stop staring at yourself, Susan."

But she cannot help it. Granny was a Great Beauty when she was young, with long golden hair and blue eyes set above an aristocratic nose, and Susan is just beginning to be aware of her own features. She stares at her reflection until they become a blur, until she can almost convince herself that she is gazing at a stranger. Then she prods her upturned nose, examines the green of her eyes, pouts her lips. She sticks her tongue out and pulls at her cheeks, rolling her eyes inwards. It is impossible to tell what she looks like. Until recently she didn't even care, but lately it is starting to bother her that her teeth aren't straight. She grimaces into the mirror and tries futilely to push them back with her fingers. Her mouth is a riot of molars clashing with canines battling with incisors. A bit like the South African history she has been learning; every one fighting for their own space.

"Susan?"

She leaps guiltily away from her dressing table and onto her bed.

“Yes?”

Her grandmother opens the door. “Let’s wash your face, dear and then you can help me in the garden. Your mother’s coming home tomorrow morning and I want to put some flowers in her room.”

“Okay.” She follows her out into the passage and to the bathroom. Granny dampens a cloth under the tap and gently wipes her face with it. The sensation is wonderful against her skin. She feels the crust of dirt and tears smoothed away by the cool, pure circling of her grandmother’s caress.

“There, there. You didn’t need to cry, dear. Granddad was only doing what was best for you. He loves you.” She sits down delicately on the stool next to the bath and gives a dainty cough.

“Perhaps you are too young for this to mean anything, but his brother Arthur, your great-uncle, was something of a black sheep. He was a whole ten years older than Granddad, but he was terribly irresponsible. When he was twenty-one he disgraced the family name by running off with a married woman. Nobody knows what happened to him because he was never heard from again. Well, you can imagine what a shock it was. Your great-grandfather never quite recovered. He became ill after that and a lot of responsibility fell on Granddad. He had three younger sisters to look after and if any of them got into trouble, he was blamed. Great Aunt Polly was an absolute terror, you know. When they were walking home from school she would climb over walls into people’s gardens and fill her pockets with fruit from their orchards. Once she actually stole a whole bagful of oranges from the Mayor’s garden, and because Granddad was supposed to be watching her, his parents considered it his fault. So he had to go over to the Mayor’s house to apologise and return the fruit.”

"That's not fair."

"Well no, it isn't. But Granddad has always had a strong sense of duty and responsibility, which is why he expects you to. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good." She takes her granddaughter's chin in her hands, and scrutinises her face. "It really is time you got braces, those teeth of yours are all over the place. Now, let's find some flowers. Help me up."

The garden is thick with colour and the noisy bustle of bees. They squat ponderously upon lilies, bungle into African violets and jasmine, thud confusedly through bushes of bougainvillea and basil. The grape vines under Susan's window are plump with glossy green spheres of fruit. Granddad has wrapped the bunches in plastic packets to prevent the birds from getting at them but even so, some are bruised by the persistent peck of a greedy beak. She picks one and squeezes it gently in her mouth with her tongue until it explodes, releasing a tart sweetness.

"Pass me the secateurs, please."

She watches Granny cut tea roses and lilies, her gloved hand shaking slightly, face thoughtful under a large straw hat. Granny always wears a hat. It is why people never fail to compliment her on her beautiful skin.

"Hmmm. Some maiden's hair and a couple of fern leaves, I think." She gives the flowers she has already picked to Susan and bends carefully over a dense green bed of vegetation that has spread itself alongside the neighbour's wall.

"Here we are." She stands up with her hands to her spine. "Oooph. I shouldn't bend over so much. The doctor warned me it was bad for my back. I wonder if I have anything to take for it?" She turns to her granddaughter. "

Put these in a vase with some water, will you dear? And try to arrange them nicely.”

“Yes, Granny.”

In the kitchen, she takes out a clear vase of crystal and fills it about halfway. She places the flowers on a piece of newspaper before cutting the stems neatly to make sure they will fit. Biting her lip in concentration, she arranges and re-arranges until the flowers recline in a harmonious blend of shape and colour. It is like music, she thinks, you have to get the notes just right before they’ll make a melody. Walking into Mum’s room she is immediately immersed in her smell. It is not the sticky sweetness of Mrs Kalk, but the warm, creamy scent of cocoa butter. She puts the flowers on the bedside table and smooths down the corners of the duvet, comforted by the presence of her mother’s things; the clothes in her cupboard, papers covered in her looping handwriting on the desk. Susan goes over to the window and presses her face against the glass. The aroma of sun and flowers and mother sinks into every pore on her skin. Outside, the clouds are gathering in massive bulk, their tops towering for miles above the tensely waiting earth. There will be a storm this evening, the heat of day exploding in lightning, thunder and mesmerising rain. She inhales deeply through her nose and then exhales with a long sigh. The expulsion of air forces all the anger out of her in a puff of scarlet and she relaxes, her arms hanging limp. It drifts away across the garden, over the hills and out of her vision into the burning blue of the sky.

The Child’s Survival Guide- Lesson 16: Getting on With It

As implausible as it may seem, you will not remain a child forever. One day,

you too will wake up to discover the first unfortunate signs of adulthood upon your body. This does not mean you have to grow up entirely. The fairies will always be there, whether you choose to see them or not is your business. Just don't forget that the choice exists.

Now though, it is time to face your future.

Chin up, shoulders straight, take a deep breath.

Don't panic.

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