

WE DARE NOT SAY

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**A minithesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

We Dare Not Say is an anthology of seven interlinked short stories with the general theme of intergenerational trauma among coloured families in Cape Town. The stories are arranged in a montage of internally, variably and externally focalised narratives that span over a century, from 1900 through to 2015, and are fictionalised accounts of real events, categorising them as biographical fiction. Some of the specific topics covered in the stories include incest, molestation, substance abuse, mental illness and humour as a coping mechanism.

The body of work is conceived in the context of the twentieth century trauma narrative, the complexities of which run as undercurrents through most of the important English literary works created in South Africa since the 1800s up until John M. Coetzee, but which has often lacked a female perspective, especially women of colour. The stories in this volume aim to depict a group of people, who, through centuries of oppression in the form of serfdom, servitude and segregation, have developed various coping mechanisms to make sense of their own identity in an absurdly cruel social landscape. The stories focus on the inward turning of violence, substance abuse, silence and humour as survival mechanisms after generations of trauma that have been, in a sense, the hallmarks of coloured South Africa.

The stories are told using a split narrative method, showing multiple viewpoints of the same story with perspectives ranging from young to old, crossing the gender divide in both time and space. Ultimately, *We Dare Not Say*, is a depiction of the complexities of lives lived under oppression, and the triumphs and challenges faced in trying to resolve, live through or deny the effects of such oppression on a group and the individuals that make up that group.

DECLARATION

I, Janine Carol Lange (student number: 2762585), declare that *We Dare not Say* is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

Janine Carol Lange

30 November 2016

Signature: _____



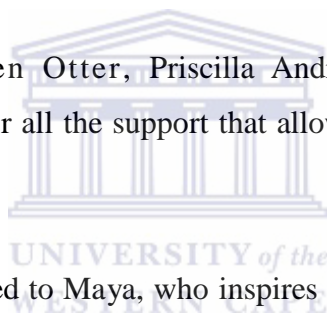
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CHAPTER ONE: REFLECTIVE ESSAY

1.1.Introduction

In this reflective essay I will introduce the reader to the main conceptual underpinnings and influences that have shaped the stories in this thesis. Various themes, including molestation and incest, mental illness, alcohol and drug abuse are dealt with, locating the stories within the broader literary context that influenced them. Furthermore, we will look at the mechanisms used for storytelling, outlining the stories themselves to give the reader a general idea of the gist of each separate narrative.



1.2.Rationale/Background

We Dare Not Say comprises seven interlinked short stories that bear witness to the experiences of coloured people who have had to deal with and been perpetrators of multigenerational transmission of trauma. The stories are a compilation of mixing real and imagined events, and span four generations of coloured families in the Cape from 1900 to 2015. They explore the multifaceted trauma passed down against the backdrop of an oppressive political and social system, encompassing the legacy of years of forced silence and submission, which has been ingrained into the South African society and has filtered through to the most intimate ways in which households and social spaces had been and are organised.

The single thread running through all of the stories in this collection is the transmission of intergenerational trauma, and the various mechanisms that people use to try to deal with the symptoms. Yael Danieli, a clinical psychologist and Director of the Group Project for Holocaust Survivors and their Children, in *The International Handbook on the Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, focuses on trauma and PTSD symptoms from psychological and sociological and epigenetic perspectives, providing clinical evidence of the ways in which traumatised individuals and societies pass on trauma to future generations. Danieli claims that entire societies can be affected by trauma, as is seen in many first nation populations whose cultures had been destroyed leaving them without a capacity of sense-making of the world, and others who survived slavery, colonialism, persecution and genocide. (673)

She suggests that communities who lived through the above mentioned ruptures, turn the violence onto themselves and expose several generations continuously to traumatic experiences of sexual abuse, family violence, child abuse, accidental death, and suicide.

“The trauma here is intergenerational in the sense that economic, social and political dependence – the effects of slavery, colonialism and genocide – are intergenerational. The effects of the trauma can also be transmitted to succeeding generations through culture.” (372)

She coins the term “a conspiracy of silence” for the way in which cultures force people to deal with their negative experiences through silence. “Silence becomes a way to protect others and oneself from the effects of intergenerational trauma.” Danieli suggests that

one should examine the cultural rituals of communication and topics of conversation that are considered taboo, for there-in lies the events causing the traumas. (372)

The stories focus on this grappling with the conspiracies of silence through the use of language and referencing the nexus between the working class and upwardly mobile generations of coloured families in Cape Town. The deliberate switch from Afrikaans to English as a language of instruction in schools brought about barriers in communication among family members, and an accompanying stigma and suspicion associated with the change.

In my literature review, I found very few examples of work related to my proposed project. Most of the first half of the twentieth century was dominated by the writing of white men, including the likes of Douglas Blackburn, Herman Charles Bosman and Alan Paton, with a spattering of black writers such as Sol Plaatjie and Thomas Mofolo (SAHO 1-4). The latter half of the century, saw black writers such as E'skia Mphahlele, Alex la Guma, and James Matthews come to the fore as the apartheid system intensified.

The main female authors acknowledged during the first half of the twentieth century include Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith and Sarah Gertrude Millin, and it was only from the 1950s onward, that women such as Nadine Gordimer and Bessie Head came onto the literary scene, followed by authors Miriam Tlali, Sindiwe Magona and Elsa Joubert in the latter half of the century. Works written by coloured female writers about coloured people include Rayda Jacobs, Zoë Wicomb, Yvette Christiansë, Maxine Case, Mary Watson, Rehanna Roussouw and more recently, Jolyn Phillips.

1.3. Conceptual Framework

Much of the work that I find interesting about the coloured community in South Africa has been written in the academic arena, specifically, Mohamed Adhikari's *The Sons of Ham: Slavery and the Making of Coloured Identity*, as well as *Burdened by Race: Coloured Identities in Southern Africa*. Another academic publication about similar issues is Zimitri Erasmus's *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place*, which carefully documents the complexities of coloured history and identity against the backdrop of South Africa's history of servi-

tude, colonialism and apartheid. Other important works include June McKinnon's historical tribute, *Tapestry of Lives*, which examines the women of the Cape in the seventeenth century, both coloured and settler, and Richard van der Ross's *In Our Own Skin: A Political History of the Coloured People*.

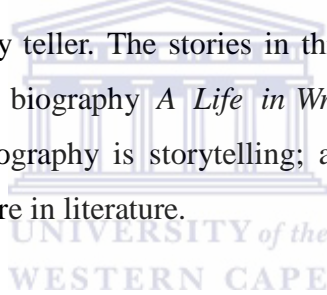
Within the body of coloured literature in English, I found no single work which directly touched on all the elements I have incorporated into this volume. Chris van Wyk's *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, and Richard Rives's *Buckingham Palace, District Six*, explore the lives of coloured families, but do not zoom in on the variety of perspectives which I have proposed. Peter Abrahams's *Path of Thunder*, and Davids in *The Blacks of Cape Town*, highlight the elements of disconnection experienced by younger, more educated coloured people in understanding the older generation, although they do not concentrate on the same time frame nor on the specific cluster of themes that form part of these stories. Stamatelos in Afrikaans and Wicomb in English, although writing about coloured people, for me, do not resonate a „coloured voice“ with which I can identify, though their characters' problems with their roots, touches on the shame to which I direct a spotlight in some of my stories.

The use of humour as a coping mechanism is used by Richard Rive, as well as Nathan Trantraal and Chris van Wyk, and is an important aspect in story telling about coloured people in Cape Town. I attempt to bring it across in my stories not as mere humour, but as a survival tactic and above all, as wrestling with the conspiracies of silence. It is intriguing that I find Nathan Trantraal's Afrikaans poetry volume *Chokers en Survivors* to be one of the most honest and accurate books around the themes I investigate in the coloured experience in Cape Town.

Sexual abuse is another theme that is explored, but I could find no books written on the subject in the coloured community, despite it being a very real problem in South Africa (Rape Crisis). Authors who deal with the problem in South Africa are Pat Stamatelos in her book, *Kroes*, in which a young coloured girl who later has her racial status changed to „white“, is molested by her mother's boyfriend, and *Pastoor* which recounts a young woman's story of her childhood molestation at the hands of a youth pastor. Elbie Lotter's, *Dis ek, Anna*, and Odette Schoeman's, *Swartskaaap* also deal with the molestation theme.

In my stories I reference issues such as molestation, incest and domestic violence, which seem generally, to be as taboo in literature as they are in life, the scars of which have marred generations, and perpetuated the complicit silence that fosters these terrible acts.

The stories in this thesis are categorised as biographical fiction due to the fictionalising of actual events and historical persons. This fictionalisation creates dramatic effect, which provides versatility and flow to the genre and exempts it from having to conform to the autobiographical contract. The work conforms very much to the twentieth century trauma narrative in its use of memory and orality to explore the marginal self. The narrator's episodic memory of events bring important pieces of information to the fore. As individuals, our memories are based on events that occurred previously in history, but they are not objective – they are influenced by perceptions we held at the time as well as current perceptions consisting of silences, lies and glimpses of truth. Coupled with oral tradition, past events can transform the lives of the current and future generations through the representations made by the story teller. The stories in this collection stand as a subjective transmission of memory. In the biography *A Life in Writing*, by John Kannemeyer, JM Coetzee suggests that all autobiography is storytelling; all storytelling is autobiography - identifying the fluidity of this genre in literature.



1.4.Methodology

Split narrative: The split narrative technique is used in this body of work, which is the narration of stories from varying perspectives, allowing the author to create variety and contrast in the narrative. All of the stories are told from a first person perspective, allowing the reader to see the same situation from varying internally focalised perspectives. Connections are made through history and place by providing intersections between stories and links between characters in the vein of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* or Stockett's *The Help*. Certain stories, such as *Under the Bed* and *What my Mother Said*, are homodiegetic narratives, where the narrator is also present as a character in the story.

Experimenting with voice: *We Dare Not Say* is a multi-layered narrative, and follows the form of the life cycle, with characters that are in various stages of life, i.e. childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age, providing a closed circuit, but with various characters. The work looks at these issues subjectively from multiple perspectives, in the first person, in the present tense, weaving each story together by looking at each character's relationship to others and to the greater plot as a whole. That was one of the main challenges: to subtly link every character, every incident, every transgression across time and space.

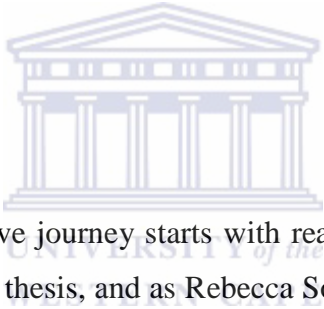
I experimented with various voice types to express variety in character, such as the streaming monologue to bring a sense of immediacy and relatability to the reader, inserting them into the situation along with the character, experiencing all of the contradictory and painful emotions. Character voice is also used in a few of the stories, such as *Under the Bed*, *I Hope He Still Likes Me*, *Sophia* and *What My Mother Said*, which is the voice specific to a character that allows the reader to hear the evolving language over generations. Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is a good example of character voice, with the reader being able to follow the developing voice of Scout, from childhood through to adulthood.

The kind of unreliable voice used in Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, appears in my story *Hundreds and Thousands* and *Papa's gone for a Walk* in order to show the diseased state of mind of the character.

Bilingualism: Bilingualism cannot be avoided when writing about the coloured working class and slaves, as the use of English and Afrikaans interchangeably is a hallmark of this group of people with diverse heritage. Afrikaans in itself is a construct first devised by slaves and was originally called kitchen Dutch or *kanala taal*, because it was an amalgamation of various South East Asian languages, a Muslim vocabulary and Dutch, spoken by slaves. Despite this, many coloured families still speak Afrikaans as their mother tongue, although English has become mainstreamed following the struggle against being taught in the „language of the oppressor“ during Apartheid. The dialect spoken in most Cape Flats communities veers sharply from the formalised Afrikaans taught in most schools. This dialect is unique in its vocabulary, as well as in its ability to animate subjects in a way that formal Afrikaans is not, often incorporating old forms into modern day conversation.

A few notable authors who use this kind of bilingualism as an extension to voice in their writing is Adam Small in *Krismis van Map Jacobs*, Nathan Trantraal, in *Chokers and Survivors* which is a tale of family survival in the harsh landscapes of Hanover Park and Mitchells Plein, as well as Rehanna Roussouw's *What Will the People Say?* and Jolyn Phillips's *Tjien Tjang Tjerries*. They illustrate how the coloured dialect, at least in the working class, is littered with colloquialisms and a seamless use of English and Afrikaans interchangeably. Historically, both in life and various forms of media, the Cape coloured accent and dialect has been parodied and presented in such a way as to depict the quintessential jester, or altogether ignored such as in Abrahams' *Path of Thunder*. The bilingualism used in the working class Cape coloured dialect, is for me, the thing that makes for rich and textured variety and a sense of the theatrical in everyday speech, and adds a sense of colour and light to interactions, creating meaning for which there is often no direct translation.

1.5. The Creative Process



Firstly, as a writer, my creative journey starts with reading. I have read many books on the subjects I wish to cover in my thesis, and as Rebecca Solnit observed, "Before writers are writers they are readers, living in books, through books, in the lives of others that are also the heads of others, in that act that is so intimate and yet so alone" (1). Before I begin writing character summaries, my creative work begins with writing, as well as talking to people who are of similar ages to my characters, or who would have been during the time period in which the story is set. I have spoken to, for research purposes, young girls, teenagers, adults of both sexes as well as the aged in order to get details about specific times in history as well as the way in which the various age groups articulated themselves, to get a feel for possible character traits as well as to exercise some imitations of rhythm and vocabulary.

I have also been working with Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*. She suggests using morning pages, which I have been practicing, as a way to create a disciplined approach to writing. The exercises are there to stimulate creativity and create focus (8).

Furthermore, Anne Lamott advises that characters develop organically and that the author does not attempt to make them become a mouthpiece for the author's agenda (53).

This might seem absurd, since the author writes the characters into being, but I think this speaks to authenticity and truth telling. In my collection of stories, I attempted various iterations of the stories from numerous perspectives until I found the versions that sounded truest to me, feeling my way through the characters.

Many of the scenarios have been based on stories I have grown up with, or heard from various people. But here I want to make a crucial ethical point: the stories I use here, the incidences, are *so* common, are about things happening *so* regularly in many coloured communities that my intervention as writer was not to “hide” the true origin of the stories or to protect a unique character, but rather to turn these “general” incidents into a specific cameo with its own unique timbre, visual space and character. So to a large degree, the details around the main occurrences have been fabricated in order to animate the stories with particulars bringing to life the different periods and that would carry the thrust of the stories along authentically. For these fabrications I have had to do much research including archival research, desktop research and interviews with various individuals.



1.6. Proposed Outline of Stories

We Dare Not Say aims to go beyond the often lopsided and reductive literary depictions of Colouredness, which contributes to an on-going voicelessness of people across this cultural grouping. All the stories in this thesis are told from a first person perspective, and the voices range from children to the aged and across gender and time.

Under the Bed is told from the perspective of a little girl in the 1980s in Bonteheuwel on the Cape Flats who overhears the story of her friend’s brother being the product of incest. She has hidden under the bed and cannot make herself known for fear of a beating, and she comes to understand why the neighbour’s daughter has continually tried to commit suicide. It illustrates the shroud with which molestation is covered, and the unfair and inappropriate contexts to which children are exposed.

Hundreds and Thousands and *Papa’s Gone for a Walk*, are set in the 1950s and early 1960s, in Rondebosch East and Bonteheuwel in Cape Town, and illustrate the stories of two men, both afflicted by mental disorders that are misunderstood. It illustrates their families’

inability to deal with their breakdowns in light of the lack of support, education and an abiding superstition that evil can be cast out by rituals. In *Hundreds and Thousands*, uncle Leonard has a nervous breakdown in full view of the children he has been left to supervise, leading to nonsensical mumbling, a house full of burnt shoes and eventually, a trip to an asylum.

What my Mother Said is set in 2015 and is a story about a woman who finally asks questions about her father, after thirty years of her mother's silence. The mother tells of the events that led to the birth of her daughter, thirty years prior, and of the mother's heartbreak after finding out that her high school sweetheart and the father of her child had been arrested and charged with the rape and assault of another young woman. The shocking story gives the daughter insight into the nagging feelings of abandonment and neglect she felt for years at the hands of her mother, and she gains understanding and empathy for the mother whom for years, she has simply resented.

Papa's Gone for a Walk, is the story of Gabriel Benjamin, who, after possibly having undiagnosed Alzheimer's disease for a while, goes for a walk and never returns. His children think he has gone to visit his sister, but after one of them finds out accidentally after three days that he never arrived, they get together a search party. After months of searching, his body is tracked down in a morgue, his remains having been found in the Philippi farm lands.

The Day I Met my Father, deals with a teen girl's impressions of her introduction to her estranged father, and the struggles with her own identity and roots after having learnt that he had been jailed for six years. She has lingering questions about his absence from her life, but she also has an avoidant personality and lacks the courage to persist in her quest to find out more about her father.

Sophia, is set in 1900 in District Six, and is about the birth of Sophia Stokes, the daughter of a Christian covert from Islam who lived in the Malay quarter and who came from a proud Muslim family who became wealthy land owners after the abolition of slavery in the 1830s. It is told from the perspectives of Mariam Stokes, who recounts her mother's disappointment at her turning away from her faith for a man, and how her family disowning her. Mariam dies during child birth and the question of fulfilling tradition and the future

course of the life of her new born daughter come into play after her death.

I Hope He Still Likes Me is set in the late 1990s, shortly after the legalisation of abortion in South Africa. The story is about a teenage girl, Rene, who falls pregnant at 16 and hides it from her mother because she is afraid that her mother will be disappointed in her. Her boyfriend, Mark, pays for her to have an abortion, and then leaves her to find her way home by public transport. After confessing to her best friend about what she has done, Rene is ostracised, and soon after is coerced into sex with Mark soon after the abortion. She is wrought with feelings of inadequacy and shame and is rendered a double blow when she finds out that Mark had been cheating on her.



1.7. Conclusion

Ultimately, *We Dare Not Say*, is a depiction of the complexities of lives lived under difficult circumstances, often not within the power of the affected individuals to change. It is an attempt at authentically depicting the trauma that Coloured people have passed on from generation to generation and the myriad challenges that living in an oppressive, diffractive society has posed. This body of work uses a largely female perspective, which has sorely been lacking around the topics dealt with in this thesis. I have attempted to represent a complex microcosm of society through the personal narratives of individuals living in Cape Town between the beginning of the twentieth century to the present.



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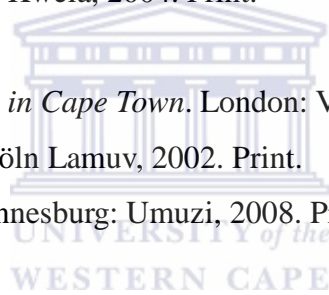
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CHAPTER TWO: CREATIVE WRITING PORTFOLIO

2.1. Under the Bed

I'm lying very still. Yolanda's next to me. She's tracing the coiled springs with her finger. I see dust falling on her cheek. She sneezes. My finger is on my lip: "Shhht." Auntie Shirley is looking after us today. We're lying under my cousin's bed. It's too cold and wet to go outside, so we're spying on the boys. They always talk about forbidden things. I move the dusty suitcase with my foot. In the gap under the night frill I can see the dark claw of the cupboard. Yolanda pokes me in the ribs. She points to a dead cockroach and pulls a terrible face. Just as I start to scurry out from under the bed, we hear the boys. I dive back. Both of us know to stay tsjoepstil. If they find us here they gonna bliksem us.

The springs suddenly bounce down as they both hop onto the bed. I don't like it here. My cousin Roger once tried to suffocate me with a pillow. He and Llewellyn are sitting and talking about Aloe. People say he's tatie. He pulls his tollie out and chases children with rocks.

Then we hear the word naai and I'm all ears. It's a word I hear at night sometimes and it's usually followed by swirling heat of sounds and lots of moving in the dark room. Sometimes I can hear a familiar voice or squeak of a bed, but other times I'm not sure what the noise is. Roger tells Llewellyn he naaied Sandy. I make big eyes at Yolanda and shake my head. He's lying. He didn't even have the guts to give her a Valentine's card. I had to throw it in their letterbox and run away before she saw me. Now Llewellyn tells Roger how he cheated in a history test by writing the answers in the spine of his school book. I raise a finger to Yolanda. This is the information we can use against them next time they want to piemp on us.

Llewellyn is saying something. He's talking so softly we can't hear. I cup my hand over my ear and move my head closer to the mattress.

"Yo bra, I'm gonna moer you if you tell anyone what I'm gonna say now."

"Ag voetsek," Roger says. "I'm not a moffie, I don't skinner."

"I came home from school yesterday. Mama and Derra were fighting in the kitchen so they didn't hear me. They were making a moerse noise. I just heard things breaking, and Jesus, the words. Fok, all over the place. Ma was shouting at Derra: „Don't think I forgot how you

focked around with Marlene and toe die neighbours die boere roep, moes ek vir jou opcover. Up until this day I covered up for you. En nou het jy die fokken cheek om nóg „n meisie met die lyf te maak.“”

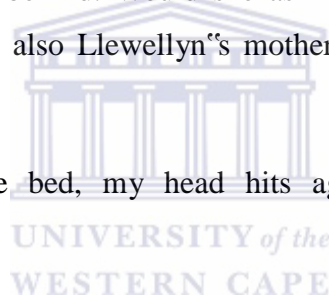
It is quiet in the room. We hear Roger saying slowly, “But Marlene is your sister...?”

I turn my head to Yolanda. She doesn’t look at me. I know that the ambulance always comes to fetch her mother. Roger used to make fun of her behind her back. He said Marlene needed to be on malpille because she kept trying to off herself. I asked him about malpille, and he just said that she kept taking too many tablets.

Yolanda is ignoring me. She just looks up at the mattress. I can’t ask her anything, because the boys are still here. It’s so quiet. I can suddenly hear everyone breathing.

It felt longer than church for the boys to leave. But they were scarcely out of the room when Yolanda dashed out. I remained behind. Would she ask her mother about what Llewellyn said? I frown. But if Marlene is also Llewellyn’s mother, is he then Yolanda’s brother? I always always wanted a brother.

As I shift out from under the bed, my head hits against the metal beam: “Eina!”



2.2. Hundreds and Thousands

In 1936, when the Europeans were still in charge we still used to live in Crawford, there where Jan Smuts and Kromboom roads are now. That land is still empty till today. Me and Charles used to play in the yard of our house with our ring-ting flying saucer. We used to wind it up, and it would go woo-woo-woo into the air. We had two big avocado trees, and a lot of fruit trees. In the winter months, it hailed. I remember how we used to watch the avocado pears fall to the ground. We also had guavas, a grape vine and a mulberry tree. My father used to keep chickens and rabbits, and he had a vegetable garden where he grew onions, tomatoes, blou ballas, potatoes and chillies. Nowadays you never taste potatoes like those fresh ones that you put in the coal stove with real butter. That chilly plant outside is still from those days. I kept them all these years, every season I used to pick some and dry them and replant the seeds.

We moved from District Six in the early 1930s, because my father bought a plot next door to Uncle Leonard here in Crawford, and they built our house with their own hands. Later the government paid us out and he bought another house here in Burwood Road, there where Woolworths is now. I had to leave school when I was in standard one, so I could help my mother look after my brothers and sisters. Education for girls was not so important.

Anyways, our yard and uncle Leonard's yard used to face each other, so that we could run into both houses. Uncle Leonard was such a happy go lucky man. He used to call me Tink-tinkie because I was so small and he said I reminded him of a small bird. He'd bounce me on his knee and tell me stories about the old days, when they'd go dancing in District Six with their suitbroekies, kruisbanne and white shoes. "Never trust a man in white shoes," he used to tell me.

One day, it was cold, I remember, we were all outside in the yard. Ria was chasing the chickens and then suddenly we heard a hullabaloo in uncle Leonard's house. We saw antie Rachel run down the street, haar paadjie skief geklap, with uncle Leonard shouting behind her. I didn't know him to talk so ugly. Then everything went quiet. After a while I decided to go in. Standing at the door, I couldn't believe my eyes. Uncle Leonard was sitting on the kitchen table with a fishing rod in his hands. The gut hanging on the floor, his legs dangling down and he'd turned up his broekpyp. He was pulling on the rod like he was reeling in something.

“Haai, look at this. Hulle sal my nooit gloe nie. „n Lekka stukkie rooiaas and a sinker and away we go. Can you believe it? Harders hier in Athlone, maar my! Rachel don’t like them much cause she say it’s too much work to clean the skubbes off, but we can eat on this, the whole week. Sophia can even take for her, Gabriel and the laaities. Ooh gits, the tide is coming in, I better hurry. I wonder how harders got to Athlone? Aagh, I’ll take what I can get. Tinktinkie, ko’ kyk hie! Go fetch a bakkie to put your mommy’s fish in. Why you looking at me like that? Jou tong ingesluk?”

I thought, nee fok, I’m not gonna go into that kitchen now. I had to get the children to our house for bread and jam, because Mummy wasn’t home yet.

But uncle Leonard was one stream of talking and moving. “This is daar’m nice now. The weather is mos perfect for catching fish today. I never catch nothing on hot days, but on these overcast days the fish can’t see you. My geluk is in. Hundreds and thousands, I tell you, hundreds and thousands. This reminds me of when I was a kipper and Derra used to take us to Die Dam. Neh, Derra!” He looks next to him like someone’s sitting there. My God, I feel my throat closing with fear.

“We used to take our handlines with and catch klipvissies while Derra cast out on the rocks and caught the big fish. Back then there were so many fish: geelbekkies, galjoen and the perlie. They was so much you could take it out of the rock pools with a butter knife, now you have to dive to get them. Mammie used to make the best paella with that perlie, so soft. I wonder where’s Rachel so long. That blerrie meit. All the years we were together and now this kak. If I catch that ou, he’s gonna see.”

*

“Suzy! Suzy! Where’s Ria and the boys? Bring a bucket, quick, come quick. Leonard! Wat die hel het jy aangevang?” Mummy shouted. “Wat mean jy, Sophie? You should’ve seen today, I caught so many harders. Hundreds and thousands. I am cooking them myself. Why you so vies?”

“You blerrie fool. You sit there on the stoep rolling your cigarettes! You could’ve bladdy killed the children. What are you talking about harders? You baked the shoes in the coal stove. Die hele fokken plek vol roek. Is jy bevitsek? Open the windows! Hundreds and thousands... se gat!”

“I tell you, Rachel will be happy because she don’t like to clean off the skubbes, but I don’t mind. That *is* nogal a dirty business. At least she don’t have to cook now. I put some in a bakkie for you also, there was so much.”

“Heeltemal laf. Lig jou gat. Where’s Rachel?” Mummy smacked uncle Leonard over the head. “Nie man Sophia. Wat makeer jou?” he asked surprised.

Mummy was furious and walked over to our house. She asked me what happened, and I told her about antie Rachel and the shouting. She just said, “Ooh, die’s „n hele fok-op in „n Dix-ie”. She went to fetch the neighbour to take uncle Leonard to the hospital. He went away for a long time. Nervous breakdown they said, but when he came back, he wasn’t the same uncle Leonard anymore. No more jokes, no more Tinktinkie, just rolling cigarettes on the stoep the whole day. Antie Rachel never came back again.

I sometimes remember the happiness on his face that day, among the many fish on the kitchen floor. Harders in Athlone, hmmh.



2.3. What my Mother Said

I set up the Sony HD camera in the corner of the room on a tripod I borrowed from my cousin. Goosebumps cover my arms and cool hairs prickle the back of my neck. I have been trying to avoid this conversation for a long time, but now that Ouma has died, I'm afraid that if I don't ask about where I come from, I'll never know. My mother has agreed reluctantly to talk about my father, after thirty-two years. I had met him only once and decided after that: I wouldn't go back. She never spoke about him, and over the years it had become a distant topic. I think I was a constant reminder to her of what had happened, but somehow was the only one who didn't know the whole back story.

"Is this okay?" I ask rhetorically, motioning to the camera. Mother nods. She's sitting in bed, and straightens up. Her short, greying hair is messy and she's still in the old cotton nightgown with the frayed lace bib that I bought for her at a factory shop a few years ago. She stiffens in anticipation of the interview, and puts on her reading glasses. A sort of shield, I guess. I lie down next to her on the bed, my back facing the camera.

Outside through the bedroom window I see a small waterfall trickling down the mountain after last week's rain. The weather is usually foul here, but today I'm thankful that we have a holiday house to come to, something that probably wouldn't have been possible had my mother chosen to be with Greg, my father. He seemed quite poor, weathered skin, tattered clothes and false teeth.

"So tell me about you and Greg. How did you two meet?" I ask.

"It was the year I matriculated, with distinction nogoal. I was quite proud of myself. Was set to start a BCur nursing at Nico Malan the following year. We were camping at Sonnester and Patti dragged me to the bonfire. All our siblings were going, but I just wanted to lie in the tent and read. Patti just came in, grabbed my book and said 'Nie man, vir wat wil jy heel tyd in die tent opgeskiep wies?', so I went.

"It was New Year's Eve and back then the teenagers used to smear each other. If you were caught outside your tent after midnight, the young guys would throw rooi-aas at you. You'd stink for days after that. I wasn't interested in all that, but anyway, I went with. Greg was at the bonfire with a few of his friends."

I can't imagine Mother as a young woman. I'd seen pictures, but she is usually so formal, reserved, that I can't imagine her having fun.

"Greg was actually my first boyfriend. I was a tomboy at high school, always with Colin and his friends. That, and Mama was an alcoholic, so I never took people home, because you never knew if she was going to be drunk or not. That was very embarrassing because she could be very crude."

"That sounds awful. We'll get back to that later, but let's just get down what happened with you and Greg. What was he like?" I ask.

"Well, he was very handsome. Tall and slim, with tanned skin and lots of dark messy hair. He had green eyes, and he had started growing a beard, which looked ridiculous against his smooth skin. They grew in little fluffy tufts. He spoke with a slight lisp. It was adorable." She stares into the corner of the room behind me and smiles for a little while, then pulls herself together quickly.

"Okay, so I was sitting on the beach by the fire. I was too shy to go skinny dipping with the rest of them, and Greg came to sit next to me. He asked me about my nursing course, why I wanted to do it, about my family. He seemed genuinely interested."

"Why *did* you want to study nursing? I mean, you could have done anything. You'd done so well," I asked. She had excelled at school, everyone in my family had, but although most of her siblings went into business, my mother became a teacher. Not exactly a sought after profession in my book.

"I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I had good grades, but in our circles, if you were clever and a woman you had three options – teacher, nurse or receptionist. I didn't research it like you people do now; it was just something to do rather than going to work. So anyway, this handsome guy was sitting next to me and was interested. It made me feel special. He was the first boy who ever showed an interest. Boetie Colin was always the popular one at high school. All the girls wanted to be his girlfriend and all the boys his friends. He used to drag me everywhere with him. I was even on the boy's table tennis team at school. The only boys I saw were his friends, and he wasn't going to let any of them date his baby sister."

"So after you went back to Cape Town, how did you keep in touch?"

“After camp he came to visit me at home. Dada asked him, 'Vir wie soek jy?' and he then said it was for me. Dada said, 'Jy biete vir jou inhou. Sy's my baby. As ienige iets met ha' gebeur gat ek jou dōner.'

“But Greg wasn't put off by Dada. Every Saturday he took a train and two busses to come and visit me, because he lived in Retreat and we lived in Bonteheuwel, so it was far to travel. He even came when it rained. Always brought flowers. All the girls who were standing outside hanging over their front gates, would whistle when he walked up to our door. Mrs Hendricks next door used to shout, 'Kyk vir sexy. As jy klaar is met haar, kan jy maar by my deur kom klop. Bring net die blomme saam.'

“We used to go on double dates with my friend, Shireen, who was dating his friend, Johnny. They also met at camp. We'd go to the library and walk in the Gardens, and I'd talk about the books I'd read and made suggestions about the places I wanted us to go. He didn't even really like books, but he listened anyway. Looking back now, I think he dated me because he thought I would be someone his family would approve of. He came from a well-to-do family.”

“So when did things go pear-shaped?” It flashes through my mind: why do I use this word, this euphemism for the thing I actually want to know?

“Well, we'd been dating for about two years, then I found out I was pregnant. I only told Mama and Dada after six months, I was so scared of what they would say. I wore baggy clothes, even before I was pregnant, so no one thought anything.”

“What did they say when you told them? I can't imagine Dada was very pleased.”

“Mama was okay, I don't really remember Mama being very present as a mother, probably because there were nine of us. But with you she was very supportive. She asked me if I loved him and whether I wanted to get married. I said no, and she was okay with it. Dada said, „Ria, hoe kan jy so kalm wies? Sy het „n mooi toekomst voor haar gehad. Ek is baie teleurgesteld.“ He didn't talk to me for the rest of the pregnancy. Once you were born though, you were the apple of his eye.”

“How did you feel about being pregnant?” This is my question. This is what I ask after she had just said that she didn't want to marry my father.

“Well, I was depressed. I suppose I was depressed for as long as I can remember, but back then we didn’t know about things like Prozac. So, I stayed inside and helped Mama around the house. Anyway, one night, just as everyone had come to terms with my being pregnant, Shireen and I were braaing at Patty's place. The guys weren’t with us. Patty called me into the room at some point in the evening and told me that Greg’s sister just called to say that he and Johnny had been arrested for raping Judy, their neighbour's daughter. She was much younger than them, I think about fifteen. I couldn’t believe it. We knew her. She used to play with Greg’s sister.”

“What did you do when you found out?” I ask, avoiding the reason for her depression.

“I had to go to the holding cells in Steenberg to see him. He was sitting and smoking a cigarette, bloodied shirt and swollen nose. When I asked him, he said no, he didn’t rape her and that everyone was making a big deal about nothing. He said he’d sort it out and then I started screaming at him that we had a baby coming and now this happens, then he accused me of not supporting him. I decided then that I didn’t want anything to do with him. I cut the relationship right there.”

“How did it happen? I mean, what would make someone do that to a child?” I ask, trying to make sense of it all, trying to ask the questions that matter, without asking the questions that will destroy my world and hers: was she also raped? But my mother walks the tightrope and I let her.

“Well, the one thing I didn’t like about Greg was that he used to smoke dagga. Otherwise, he was a gentleman, and I didn’t think it was any of my business, so I asked him not to smoke when he came to visit me. I think they were smoking dagga and then they went out looking for action.”

“But dagga doesn’t really make people violent. Are you sure he wasn’t on something else?”

“I suppose he could have been, but I wouldn’t have known what to look for. We weren’t really into drugs. We’d have a drink on the weekends yes, but nothing else. The one time I smoked dagga, I locked myself in Shireen’s bathroom and cried until it wore off.”

Suddenly my mother begins to fidget nervously, eyes darting across the room and finally resting on the camera. I want to ask her. I want to ask her more, but my body refuses, my tongue simply cannot go there.

“Do you have to tape this?” she asks after a long silence. “I mean, I’m not really photogenic and now you’ve got me on camera with this old nighty and hair looking like *wie kom daar aan*. I haven’t even brushed my teeth yet.”

“Don’t worry about the camera. It’s only for my records, in case I forget something and I need to go back,” I try to reassure her.

“Why do you want to write about this anyway? I’m sure this isn’t an interesting topic.”

“I’m interested in it. It’s part of my story and I want to tell it. Now that Ouma’s gone, there’s really no one left who can give us details about our history, so I decided that I can make some sort of record for my kids so that they will know about Ouma, you and where they come from.”

“Jeez, are you sure you want to tell *this* story? Not exactly something to be proud of,” she says, blushing.

“Well maybe it can be a reminder of how far they’ve come. Let’s keep going,” I say, hoping not to lose momentum.

“By the time I went into labour, I hadn’t even thought of a name for you yet. Jenny and Colin tossed a coin to decide on your name. Colin said that if he won, your name would be Jesse, and Jenny said that if you were a girl, you’d be called René. Patty said whether girl or boy, I should call you Indigestie, because I had the most severe heartburn while I was pregnant with you.”

“And what did they have to say about this whole thing that happened with Greg?”

“No one said anything. They just acted like everything was normal.” Her face is twitching slightly under her left eye. Her cheeks were suddenly bloated and swollen, and her eyes red, silent tears streaming down her cheeks. She keeps staring at the camera.

I get up and walk over to the bedside table right next to her side of the bed, and hand her a tissue. “Didn’t anyone say they were sorry it happened to you?”

“No. What would they have to say sorry about?” The tears flow freely now, trickling down into the fold of her double chin as she tries to choke the words out.

“Because your boyfriend raped someone and you were left alone and pregnant at twenty?”

“No. It was just the way it was. Everyone just pretended that he never existed. Until now, no one has ever said anything to me about that. No one has even asked what happened to him.”

We lay quietly on the unmade bed for a long time before I broke the silence. Her face is blotchy and inflamed, but she has dried her eyes with her forearm, discarding the spectacles on the bed. “Well, *I’m* sorry that happened to you,” I say to her and the tears now threaten to spill out of my own eyes. I hug her and she begins to cry, her body shuddering against me.

I pull away, give a quick smile and hop off the bed, “I think it’s time for a strong coffee,” and off I go to the kitchen.

It was only when I looked at the footage afterwards that I saw how she moved to lie on her side and stared out for a long, long time at the mountain with its tiny trickling, sparkling stream.



2.4. Papa's Gone for a Walk

Danny Boy comes on the radio.

“I haven’t heard this in years. „Oh, Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling. From glen to glen and down the mountainside. Hmm hmm hmmm. It's you, it's you, must go and I must bide.” Papa used to sing this song to me at bedtime every night. I miss him so much, but I’m sure in a short while I will see him and Mama again, with all the other family who have passed. We used to live with him in our old house in Lawrence Road, Athlone. The house was made of zinc plates, and it was one of nine that people used to call the nine doors. That was before the Apartheid government built all those small council houses on the Cape Flats. The properties were big and the houses were far apart. We lived there with Mama and Dada and the kids, your mother wasn’t born yet. It was only me, Charles, Toni, Jenny and Colin,” I say to René, who is sitting at the table wanting to know about our family history.

“We had a huge field across the road where we used to go and play after school. We all went to the school at St Mark’s Anglican church where Papa was a lay minister. He was a thin man, very dark, with dark hair and a thick beard. He was a carpenter by trade and also a money lender, but not a bad one. Everybody loved him. Every Sunday the ladies in the street used to come over with their beehive hairstyles and white gloves and ask to speak to Papa, because their husbands had drunk all their Friday pay up. When he died they were all at the funeral. The church was so full; people were standing out in the streets in front of the church.”

“How did he die?” René asks.

“He was still young, sixty four. He used to go off his trollie sometimes. I’ll never forget how Mama used to burn miyung stokkies every time he started to perform. I still can’t stand the smell now. It makes me think about Mama screaming and the children running around in the house trying to collect all their toys and clothes before he got them. The first time it happened we didn’t know what was coming and so everyone was shocked and scared, but after that first time it was always the same – first he would start by walking through the house singing *Danny Boy* at the top of his lungs. He would have a big white washing bag with him and picked up all the toys and shoes that were lying around on the floor. He took them all outside and put them on the stoep. Then, he chopped wood with the axe on the old stump he kept after they chopped down the bluegum in the yard. He made a fire and then took his white hanky, wiped his shoes and put them next to the bag on the stoep.

“Then he changed into his blue dungaree and went over to the bag. He threw everything out onto the table where they used to slaughter chickens folding the clothes neatly, putting them in piles. Then, to everybody’s utter astonishment, he started throwing the things one by one into the fire. When Mama came in from the shops that first time, she started shouting and ran towards him. She tried to stop him, but he pushed her and she fell into the fire. Up to the day she died, she still had that scar on her shoulder from the burn. The dust was everywhere and the chickens were running around heel bedônerd. I grabbed the kids and told Charles to hide them in the bedroom cupboard.

“When he finished burning everything, he walked into the house, closed the doors and started to stack the furniture against the doors. We were in the room and heard loud scraping on the floor, so I stuck my head out and saw that he had pushed the table and chairs up against the wall. Nobody could get in or out. I thought he was going to burn us all. I locked the door, and got into the cupboard with the other children. Mummy was in the bathroom washing off her arm. She came out and was shouting at him, „Papa, wat maak Papa? Hou op! Hoekom doen Papa daai?“

“Charles was sitting next to me in the cupboard, Colin on his lap. It was so dark, and then suddenly I felt wetness on my feet. Colin and Jenny were crying because they were afraid of the dark. Tony said, „Hou julle bekke,“ and put his hand over their mouths. I could smell something burning in the house. Miyung stokkies. And Mama was praying loud in the kitchen. „Hemelse Vader, dryf asseblief hierie bose gees uit my vader. Hemelse Vader, ek vra jou in the die naam van Jesus, help hom tog. Laat hy uitsnap, asseblief tog Here. Amen.“

“After a long time and lots of Hemelse Vaders, there was silence. I could hear someone turn the door handle. We were terrified. Everyone was breathing loudly. I couldn't hear voices any more. I thought he must have done something to Mama and now he was trying to get us. But a voice followed, „Petti, is Mama. Maak „ie deur oep. Waarsie anners?“

“Okay, Mama was okay. I opened the door and all the other children followed. Mama came inside and asked, „Wat gaat hie“ aan?“ looking past me. When I turned around, I saw that the front of Charles's pants was wet, and Tony shouted, „Whaa, kyk vi“ bangbroek!“

“I knew Tony was just as scared as Charles, but he always pretended to be Mr Big Stuff. „Os was bang Mama. Waa's Papa nou? Wat’s vekeed met hom?“

“„Papa“s net 'n bietjie siek geraak, baba. Hy's nou wee“ ôwright.“

“I peeped around the corner to see Papa sitting on the chair next to the coal stove. He was just sitting and staring. After a while, he said he was going for a walk. Mama didn't try to stop him. He calmly moved all the furniture out of the way and walked out. He simply walked out the door and down the street.

“When Deddy came home from work that night, Mama sent him to antie Rachel to see if he was there, but he wasn't. Antie Rachel had a car, so she and Deddy went driving around looking for Papa. They didn't find him that night. The next day was the same. Mama kept us all out of school and left Colin with the neighbour, and Jenny, Toni, Charles and me went walking around Athlone with Mama, looking for Papa.

“After three days Papa just came strolling in. He was still in his blue dungaree but no shoes. His face as calm as a plate. Mama said, „Papa, os was baie geworried. Waa“ was Papa? Papa kannie soe missing gaan nie.“ He didn't answer. He just walked straight over to the tap, filled a pot and made a fire in the coal stove to heat the water. He bathed himself and went straight to bed. When Deddy came home that night, he said he was gonna go find out what was going on, but Mama stopped him. Said he could talk to Papa in the morning after he had rested.”

“And your grandmother? Where was she?” René asks. “No, she died in 1952, the year I was born. Sophia was her name. Antie Rachel said sy't baie sommer so aanmekaar gehuil en aan die einde haarself doodgehoes.”

“Probably TB.”

“Maybe, I don't know. We heard that she was cursed by her moesliem oemie: so her mother bled to death at her birth and her Derra who insisted on raising her Kris also became tatie. You must remember, in those days people didn't have names for these things. That's why people often thought things were toordery and goëlery or that beatings or muti would help. Anyway, so Papa kept disappearing on and off that year until after a while Deddy said he couldn't handle Papa anymore. Deddy went on his bicycle to look for a house for us. One day he came home and said he'd gone to see someone at the rent office and we had a council house in Bonteheuwel. We moved out and a few months later Mama gave birth to Scilla in the new house. That was 1962.

“But one night, Scilla must have been about two months old, uncle Kallie came to us on his bicycle and told us that Papa was missing again. He said that they thought he was painting at antie Rachel's house, but she said he never pitched up. Mama asked him how long he was

gone, and he said it was a week already. So Deddy went with uncle Kallie to meet the others to look for Papa. They never found him. Weeks passed and no Papa, then months. Every night they would go out after work looking for him. We would all be alone in the house, and Mama put Charles in charge because he was the oldest of us all.”

“How long was he gone for?”

“After nine months of looking every night Mama was talking to antie Rachel, and she said she met someone who told her to go to a church where there was a doekum lady who went into a trance and could tell us where Papa was. After church that week, Mama walked with all of us to the AME church on the field by Bonteheuwel High and we all sat in the back pew. There were a lot of people in the church, but it wasn't a service. There was a lady in the front. She was wearing a long white dress and a doek over her thick black hair. She was dancing and shaking. She was talking, but I couldn't understand what she was saying.

“„Die's 'n klomp kak,” I heard Tony say next to me. „Wat gaan sy nou maak?” Mama left us at the back and told us all to be quiet. She walked to the front of the church after a long time. The lady looked at her, took some powder out of her pocket and made a cross on Mummy's forehead. „Die's duiwel se goed,” Tony whispered again. „Hou jou bek. Ek gaan vi” Mummy sê,” I said. He was quiet. We all leaned forward, because Mama bent over to tell the woman something in her ear and then the woman pushed her away and started shaking. She sounded like she was talking gibberish. She fell down and someone was standing behind her to catch her. She wriggled around on the floor, and we all jumped out of our seats and started creeping to the front on tip toes, to see what was happening.

“I was holding Scilla and she started crying. Mama looked back and pointed a finger showing us to leave the church. We left. „Jarre. Ek wens ek kon gesien „it wat maak hulle daa”,” Tony said as we all got outside.

“We sat on the steps and I had to walk up and down cause Scilla was restless. I put my finger in her mouth so she could suck on it. When Mama came out she said we have to go to antie Rachel. We went straight to the bus stop and waited for a long time until a bus arrived. Mama paid and we all sat in the first two rows. Mama sat behind us feeding Scilla.

“Charles pulled the bell just before Belgravia Road, and we all got off the bus and started walking down to antie Rachel. We sat on the couch in our Sunday outfits, me and Jenny in bobby socks and white dresses, and the boys with suits, pants too short with shiny shoes.

Mummy told antie Rachel, „Die doekum vrou het gesê os moet na 'n boer se plaas in Philippi gaan. Sy sê Papa is nog altyd daa“.“ Antie Rachel seemed sceptical, but after a bit of convincing from Mama, she agreed. „Ek gaan nie alien daantoe nie. Vra vir Cornelius om saam te kom.“

“The next day, Deddy went to work to tell Mr Lemkis that he had to go and look for his father-in-law. Antie Rachel went to Felicity stores to do the same.

“We had to go with, and we all shuffled in the back seat of antie Rachel's green station wagon. We stopped at every farm in Philippi, but no luck. Finally, we got to a farm and Mama got out to speak to the farm workers. She turned to antie Rachel and showed a hand signal. We parked and everyone got out. „Ja, daa“ was iemand wat os onder die boem gekry lê het. Hy't 'n keppie op sy kop gehad. Gelyk sos hy net daa“ gaan slaap „it. Maar daai was 'n hele paa“ maande geliede. Julle moet maar vir die boer gaan vra. Hy't die poliesie geroep ommie man te ko“ haal.“

“We all walked over to the farm house with the worker and the boer said he *did* find a dead man under the tree and that the Philippi police came to take him. He said we must go and talk to the police.

“When we got to the police station, Mama and Deddy went inside and the rest of us stayed in the car. We waited for a long time. Tony was getting bored and he tried to chip away at the wooden panel on the inside of the door.

“„Ek gaa“ jou bliksem, jou klein dôner,” antie Rachel turned and said to him. He pulled back his hand quickly and put them quietly in his lap. It was so hot that my legs were sticking to the leather seats, but I was too scared of her to ask if I could roll down the window.

“Finally Mama and Deddy came back and said the policeman told them they found the body of a man under the tree on the farm, but that it was halfway decomposed by the time they found it. He gave them a case number and said they must go to the morgue to collect the body. Mummy asked antie Rachel to take us home and she and Deddy would go and see the body. „Naai man, ek wil at least 'n bietjie action gesien „it virdag,” moaned Tony, but antie Rachel was vies: „Diesie 'n lagsaak „ie, ek sal jou action op jou gat gie!“

“We drove home and that evening when Mama and Deddy came back from the morgue, they all sat around the kitchen table at our house, talking about what the mortician said. „Hulle't

gesê hy't nog net so gesit onner die boem, soes hy sieke moes gaan slaap „it. Hy was amper net geraamte het die ou gesê. Hulle moes ammel die wurms van hom afwas toe hulle hom inbring,” Mummy told antie Rachel.

“„Toe hoe't julle gewiet is hy?” she asked. „Hy't nog sy keppie aangehad, met die paint op, en sy blou dungaree wat hy aangehad het toe hy wegeloep it. En hulle't sy tanne gehad met ammel die goud nog in ennie een ruby. Dit was definitely hy. Os moet klomp vorms ingevil het en toe sê hulle os kan ma” die lyk kom haal vir die begrafnis.”

“After about a week the coffin arrived at the house. The hearse delivered it the night before the funeral. Charles said he remembered when Ouma Sophie died, all the people came to look at the body and put white flowers next to her face, but Papa's coffin was closed. They put it on the kitchen table, so we had to eat in the lounge that night.

“After everyone went to bed, Tony tapped me on the shoulder, „Ko” os gaan kyk hoe lyk Papa,” he said. „Nee, is jy blerrie simpel. As Mama vir os kry gaan sy os sad maak,” Charles answered from the foot end of the bed.

“But I also wanted to see, so the two of us snuck out of the room to the kitchen. We tried to push the lid open from the side, but it was too heavy. Tony climbed onto the table and tried to pull the lid open from the top. I felt something on my shoulder and screamed. „Shh,” Charles whispered, with Jenny holding tightly onto his waist. Next thing Daddy was behind us. He stormed to the table and jerked Tony off by the arm and gave him a swift slap on the bum. Tony ran straight to the room without a word. Then he gave Charles a slap, so I quickly said, „Os wil net vir Papa gesien „it.”

“„Hou jy nog vir jou slim?” Deddy shouted and gave me another whack. Jenny started wailing loudly. „Ek was te bang om innie kamer te bly. It wassie ekkie,” she said. „Okay my baby,” Deddy said, picking her up and rocking her all the way to the room. „Gaan slaap nou julle. En laat ek julle wee” daar vang, dan gaan julle sien!” and out he walked. Jenny started laughing, „Julle is mos lekker dom. Jy maak nog jou mond oep,” she laughed at me. „Voetsek jy!” I shouted, and turned around to go to sleep.

“The next morning when we woke up the house was noisy already. Our clothes were neatly hanging over the chair in our room – white dresses for the girls, blue suits for the boys, shoes all shiny and polished on the floor. We got dressed and walked out, hoping Daddy wouldn't be waiting for us after the night before. Mama was wearing a long black dress with black

gloves and a veil over her face. „Deddy's al by die kerk,” she said to me, seeing the worry on my face. „Maak klaar en borsel Jenny en Scilla se hare. Die service begin oor 'n uur.” In the kitchen people were walking in and out, covering the coffin with white carnations and roses.

“We all walked together down to St Mark's church. All Mama's brothers and sisters came walking down the road with the coffin: uncle Kallie, antie Rachel, antie Gwen, antie Suzie, uncle Cecil and Charlie boy – the youngest. Everyone came out to stand at their doors and watch. People shouted, „Condolences julle.” We walked into the church and sat in the front pew while the pallbearers put the coffin on the stand in front. The church was full and when I looked back it was so full some people were standing outside in the street.

“„We will now sing,” said father Gerome. „I come to the garden alone.” We all started singing and Tony turned to me, snickering, „Hoor vir kattedoor hie” agte” my.” „Hou jou mond,” I nudged him. „And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own, and the joy we share as we tarry there, no other has ever known.” Ooh, I love that song. Mama't stil stil gesit, tears streaming down her face. Next to her antie Rachel stood up straight like a soldier. It was a long funeral and everyone came to the house afterwards.

“People spoke about how helpful Papa used to be. Some of the neighbours who borrowed money from him said how sometimes, if they were really desperate, he didn't even charge them interest on their loans. Some of the men said how he used to do kanala joppies for them. But all I could remember was how he burned all my toys and shoes. After that first time it happened, I walked over to the ashes still smouldering. Little shoes and dolls were all melted together, a shiny glass eye from one of my dolls lying in the ash, the plastic all melted and warped next to it.

“I looked up at all the people in our house, and noticed the doekum lady from the AME church standing alone in the corner. She just stood there, looking, didn't speak to a soul. She went to sit in a corner in the lounge at some point during the day, and people were walking past her as though she wasn't even there. I began to think I was imagining her. But after everyone had left the wake, she walked over to Mama, whispered something in her ear, took a white hanky out of her pocket, and stuffed it into my Mama's hand before leaving. Mama nodded as if they were agreeing on something. She never spoke about that woman again and I was too scared to ask.

“„Het jy haar gesien?“ I asked Tony after he came back from playing with his friends. „Hou op twakpraat. Jy wil net wee“ vir os bang maak,” he said, wiggling his fingers around his cheeks like worms.



2.5. The day I met my father

Nobody ever speaks about him. All I know about my father is that he wasn't and isn't there. I remember asking questions as a kid, but Mama and antie Rachel would just skirt around the issue. Mum never talks about him. She just works all the time and I stay with Mama, who is my ouma, during the day. I always wondered about why most of my friends had fathers, even if they weren't all present, and I didn't. I'd make up stories about my father – that he was a pilot, that he worked at sea, or that my mother's favourite flavour of the month was my dad.

“Mum, I want to talk to you. You're not going to like it, but I want to see my biological father.”

She's staring at me, silent.

“Now before you say no, just hear me out. I've never met him before. Don't you think that's messed up? I just want to see what he's like.”

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. Then she lifts her hand to ask me to give her a chance. “I have to tell you something about your father, and you're *really* not going to like this.”

I wait. I look at her, nothing will deter me.

“The gist of it is that he spent some time in jail, and I said I wanted nothing to do with him, but I also said if you ever asked, I wouldn't deny you access to him. So now you know.”

My turn to be silent. “In jail? Jesus Mum, what a way to find out! Why didn't you tell me before?”

“Don't use the Lord's name in vain. I wasn't sure how to say it. I mean, it's not really an easy topic.”

“Well what was he in for?” I ask, dreading the answer.

“I think you should probably ask *him* about that.”

Like I'm gonna do that. How's that gonna go? Hi dad, where've you been my whole life, and by the way, what were you in jail for?

“How can I contact him? Do you have his details?”

“Ask Patty. I think she kept in contact with his sister, Louise.” Mum turns and walks out of the room mumbling something about needing to put a load in the washing machine.

“Aunty Patty, Mum said that you might have Louise Lentz’s number. I want to go and see my father.”

“Why do you want to see him now after all these years?” The skin under Patty’s left eye suddenly twitching.

“I just want to see what he's like. Just curious.”

“You know, your father was so handsome. You look a little like his family. Very good looking family,” Patty says.

“Do you know what he was in jail for?” hoping that she will fill in the missing pieces.

“Oh, you heard about that. Jong, I'm not sure. Think they stole something, I think. Him and a friend. But you know, when you're young, you do stupid things.” She opens her bag and takes out a yellow manila address book. She leafs through the faded pages and eventually gets to L.

“Here we go, Louise Lentz. Must I call her for you?”

“Yes please” I say, suddenly relieved that I don't have to do it. She walks straight to the phone and sticks her fingers in the little slots and turns to dial. It seems like an eternity, but eventually someone picks up on the other side.

“Hallo, Louise, dis Patty Benjamin. Ja, jare laas. Hoe gaan „it met jou?” I lean a little closer, trying not to be too obvious, but I can't make out what the woman on the other side is saying. “Ja, luister hie”, René wil haar pa ontmoet. Het jy sy nommer?” She's silent for a little while.

“Oh, Okay. Dankie man. Ja, dit sal nogal nice wies. Sy het mos laas kom visit toe René nog klein was. Ja, maar anders, is julle almal alright?” Aunty Patty scribbles down a number in her book. They talk for ages, and then she puts down the phone. “Okay, she gave me your grandma's number. I'm gonna call her and you can go visit. She said it's her birthday soon. Maybe they can set up a meeting at the party.”

“Okay, thanks Aunty Patty.” How can something so difficult be suddenly so easy? And immediately I begin to wonder: what he's like. I hope he likes me. I need to go to the

hairdresser and get a wash and blow. He must regret it that he doesn't know me. Mum looks nervous, but we both went to the hairdresser and had haircuts. She looks nice.

I go into the kitchen and Mama is getting dinner ready. "Waar gaan jy so dolled op?" she asks. "I'm going to see my other grandmother. "Watse other grandmother? Waar was sy al die jare? Ek het nog nooit 'n other grandmother hie" gesien nie, net ek." That hurts. It doesn't matter. I'm going. Finally I will also have another family to talk about.

We arrive at the house. Mum has been fidgeting all the way here. This looks like a pretty rough place. I don't think I've ever been to Steenberg before. Children are running around in the streets, playing with spinning tops and balls, but they give way as we drive through the streets. We pull up at a yellow house with a big front garden.

"Here we go. Are you sure you want to do this?" she asks, but I can see that she's really asking herself the question. I get out of the car, walk to the front door and knock. A little kid with pigtails and snotty nose answers the door and runs into the house, shouting "Mummy, they here!"

An old lady comes to the door, opens her arms and hugs me. She is very short and stout, fair skin and greying hair. "And you," she says, glancing at Mum. "I haven't seen you in years, maar jy is nog altyd so pragtig. En dié lyk nes jy. Come in and have a seat."

We walk through the foyer to a big sunken lounge. The walls are yellow with dark wood floors. Blokkies, Aunty Patty always calls them. The old lady hands me a small paper bag. "Open it," she says, sitting down in a chair in the corner of the room. I see a R50 note and a pair of silver pendant earrings in a transparent plastic box.

Mum is shuffling back and forth in her chair. "So, how have you been Lorraine?" she asks nervously.

"No, things have been good. All the children grown up and out of the house, except for Greg and the kids. They stay here with me, but he's still at work. Look at you," she turns to me with a smile. "All grown up. Greg gaan so opgemaak wies om vir haar te sien."

My mother's smile is tight lipped. She's looking around nervously like she's about to get up and run. "Hmm," is all she says in reply. The wooden armrest on my seat is digging into my side. The cushions are covered in red brocade and the wood's so shiny, I can see my face in it.

I see a little girl hiding behind the lace curtain in the archway that leads to the kitchen. She's looking at me. Is she my sister?

Mum is making small talk. She's awful at small talk. All she talks about is work, work, work. The old lady is talking about how well Greg is doing, asking if Mum's married now. Everything in the house is shiny. Looks like someone went crazy with Mr Min. Against the wall in the foyer is a display case with trophies and photos. I wonder which one is my dad? Above the display case are large paintings of kids, all in their baptism gowns. Must all be hers. Six in total - four boys, two girls. I can tell because of the blue and pink backgrounds. After a long while of tea, biscuits and talking about nothing at all, Mum gets up. "Lorraine, thanks so much for inviting us. We have to go now. It's a long drive back and it's a school night."

"Yes, you must come again. And René, you must come to my birthday this Saturday. Then you can meet your daddy, hey?" She gets up and squeezes my arm. "Dan kan ek lekka my kleinkind afshow," she says, winking at me.

That wasn't too bad. We get into the car and Mum puts on the radio. "So, what did you think?" she asks, looking straight ahead.

"It was okay, I guess."

We drive back in silence, past the slums and marshes that lined the South Peninsula. It's still light as we get back home. I walk into the house and everyone is watching TV. *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Everyone knew where we'd gone, but no one asked me anything at all. Mama was in bed already, reading, Dada said. I get into my pajamas and go to eat dinner. Biryani. I hate Mama's biryani. Wish I was young again so I could tilt the plate on the arm rest of the couch and be sent to bed without dinner after I let it fall *accidentally*. I shovel the food down, excuse myself and go to bed. I stare at the ceiling for a long time, looking at the black mould that's started to form in the corner. I wonder what he's like. His mother is quite a good looking woman. I hope he likes me.

I've been waiting all week for today. Chesney's at the door. He's taking me. Mum said it's okay if I go to the party with friends. I think she just didn't want to have to deal with Greg. Chesney's my closest friend. He asked if he could bring his brother Wayne. They can be my

protection if anything goes wrong. It's dark outside at the yellow house, and a couple of guys are standing out in front, smoking cigarettes and talking about cars. One of them is sitting in a souped-up Toyota Corolla, revving it loudly. Stupid guys. One of them motions to the garage door and says, "Party's round the back. Everyone's in the yard." My heart is in my throat. Maybe I should've stayed home. I'm cold, should've brought a jersey.

"You must be René," I hear a woman's voice behind me. I turn to see a tall, tanned woman with thick black hair and dark green eyes. "You look just like your mother," she says. "I'm Louise. I spoke to your aunt, Patty, about you coming to visit. I'm glad you could make it."

"Hi, I'm Brendan," I hear from the other side. "I guess I'm your uncle." Damn, he is fine. Wish he weren't my uncle. "Come," he says, taking me by the hand. "Let me introduce you to your dad."

Everyone seems so friendly. It's actually not so bad. Brendan walks toward the garage and then steps aside, motioning for me to go in, I think. An old drunk guy is in my way. He looks like he's lurching forward, about to fall. I give way and try to jump forward to see inside the garage.

"En nou?" he looks at me, laughing. "*This* is Greg," says Brendan pointing to the man in front of me.

No, no, no, no. This can't be him. He looks like a bergie. For the first time I pay attention to the man in front of me. I take all of him in: short, with dirty grey, dishevelled hair and poor dress-sense. I go numb. He's like some horror from the 80s. I can see him moving his lips, but can't hear what's coming out of his mouth. He looks like he's wearing someone else's hand-me-downs. The green and purple tri-acetate tracksuit looks like he'd had it since his school days and his shoes look at least two sizes too big. The laces are pulled so tight they can cut off circulation. He sticks out his hand and as I shake it I see a tattoo. I can't make out what it is. A prison tjappie I'm sure.

Brendan says, "Come and sit on the chairs on the lawn. Have a chat. I'm sure you have a lot to talk about," and with that he turns around and walks away.

I suddenly hear the old ladies sitting at the table talking about me. "Ja, sy is mos Greg se dogte". They look like kerk anties – floral viscose blouses, thick makeup and heat-set

hairdos doused in so much hairspray one can smell it from here. They're eating peanuts and talking about everyone that passes their table.

Chesney and Wayne sit down with me and Greg. Chesney raises his eyebrow at me, but says nothing. I blush, embarrassed to be seen with this man. But then my dad gives me a wink and touches my hand.

“So, you must be the boyfriend?” Greg says to Chesney. “You better take care of my baby girl.”

“No,” I interject. “Chesney is one of my best *friends* and Wayne is his brother.”

“So, how do you like the party?” he asks.

“It's been good so far,” (except for you being my father). “Your family seems nice.”

“Ja, I'm married to Marion over there and we have two laaities, Nico and Sergio. You got any kids?”

Is this man on drugs or what? Who the fuck asks questions like these? “No kids. I'm still at school.”

“You never know these days. Laaities are having laaities. Did you see all the children running around in this place?”

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say to this, except: Lord, thank you that Mum never married this guy.

He directs a few questions at Chesney and Wayne. I stare around, hoping that someone will save me from this hell. “Do you want a beer?” he asks the three of us.

“Yes please,” Wayne beams back. So easily influenced. Chesney and I shake our heads.

“Greg, don't you introduce us?” say the kerk anties. Greg turns to them and says, “This is my laaitie who never comes to visit.” Fuck this asshole. I swallow hard and feel the prickle of tears in my eyes, but choke them back. I won't give this loser animal that satisfaction. I get up and go for a walk. Chesney looks at me questioningly. I wanna go home.

I walk into the house through the back door and walk through the kitchen where old ladies with white aprons, heavy makeup and hot-roller hairdos are talking about church bazaars and

the food they'll make for the Christmas fête. They are preparing large trays of cold meats and crackers with toothpicks stacked in the centre. No one notices me. I haven't seen Lorraine at all this evening.

I walk through to the bathroom and turn the handle. "Wait, someone's in here," the voice of an older woman shouts out just as I'm about to enter. I wait in the hallway, and children come running past to the bedroom where I can hear music playing. Lorraine comes out of the bathroom and gives me a hug. I hope she has washed her hands. "And you, looking so lovely this evening. Are you having fun? Did you meet Greg?"

I nod, "It's been lovely, thank you."

"Well, I'll let you get to it," she says and walks past into the kitchen to join the other women. I walk into the bathroom. White tiles line the walls. The grouting is immaculate and there's a row of blue mosaic tiles skirting the top of the tiles at face level. I sit down on the toilet, lid closed. What am I doing here? This isn't my family. Greg is a fucking dick. What could Mum possibly have seen in him?

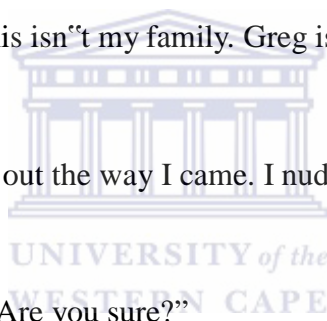
I get up after a while and go back out the way I came. I nudge Chesney and gesture for him to follow me. "Let's go," I say.

"We haven't been here very long. Are you sure?"

"Yes. I wanna go home. Don't say goodbyes. Let's just leave." Chesney whistles softly, and Wayne asks Greg to excuse him for a second.

"Cool guy," Wayne says, as we walk away. We walk to the car and drive home.

Imagine if Mum had married that guy. I'm never going back there. But suddenly I feel raw, and empty – the hole of his not being there has changed shape, but it is there. Still there.



2.6. Sophia

“Stoot my kind! Moenie nou opgie nie. Jy’s amper daar. Haal diep asem en stoot! Ek tel tot tien, dan maak jy so, nêh!” says Sies Ragmat, the midwife, white sleeves rolled up, pulling her niqāb off her sweaty face. I can’t feel anything. My whole body is draining, draining of all its blood.

“Push Mariam, push! We’re almost there!”

I can hardly breathe, but I open my mouth wide, swallow air and push. Straining every part of my body to get the baby out.

“Weh!” I hear through the haze. I fall back limply on the bed.

“*Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar*” I hear the Imam sing the call to prayer.

That is Allah making sure you hear what is right my baby. “*Ash-hadu-an-la ilah illa llah*” I try to put my finger on my lip to show the midwife she must be quiet, but my hand falls lifelessly back on the sheet.

“*Ash-hadu anna, Muhammadan-Rasulullah, Hayya ‘ala-salāh. Hayya ‘alal-falāh. Allāhu Akbar. Lā ilāha illa llāh.*”

Since I can’t do the Muslim rites with my family, it is good that you hear it from the Imam, my baby.

“Is it a boy or girl?” I ask.

“It is a girl. „n Pragtige klein dogtertjie. Tramakassie Allah, vir die baby.” The midwife puts her on my wet chest in a little white cloth. Bloody stains everywhere, but I’m pleased to hold her. Your name will be Safiyya – may Allah be pleased with you. George won’t mind. He was hoping for a little girl. The wind blows in and the window slam closed.

I heard that clapping sound when Oemie threw us out of the house. “Jy bring skande na my familie. En dan is jy nog lailai genoeg om te kom sê julle gaan trou, maar hy gaan nie vir jou draai nie! Os is saaliegse mense, en jy gaan maak zina met iemand wattie eers gesoenat issie. Jy, Mariam, is „n Jalang! Jy bring dhoenya trobbel op die familie. Daai kind van julle sil nie my familie wees nie. Jy! Jy sal wandel tot die dag van jou dood. Hoor wat ek jou sê!”

“Maar Oemie, hy is mos „n man van die boek. Op die einde vannie dag is ons tog almal die

selle.” But she had already made up her mind. “Selle sê jy? Ek ken nie vir die man nie, ook nie sy kantige boek nie; ek ken nie sy familie nie. Gaan hier uit jou ieblië! Al twee van julle.”

Another slamming door. “Ek wil vir Oemie hê,” This is what I say now as I look down on the blood under me. I feel so weak as if somebody can blow me away.

Sies Ragmat takes Safiyya. “Moenie worry nie Mariam, hulle het die dokter gaan roep. Bly net stil. George gaan nou die babytjie kry. Jy het klom” bloed veloor. Ek sit lappies onner jou.”

Sies Ragmat is lifting my body and dragging red clothes like rolls of carpet out from under me, rolling me over and putting new sheets down. I feel I’m slipping. I smell iron in the air. It’s everywhere, like a metal robe. All I see is red and all I smell is iron.

“Safiyya! Waar is Safiyya? Ek maggie haar lossie!”

“Moenie worry nie Mariam. George het vir haar. Ons het besigheid hier. Moenie worry nie. Sy’s veilig.”

George comes into the room with Safiyya in his arms. Turning to the midwife, he says, “Hulle kannie vir hom kry nie.” I know what that means. I battle to speak: “Sê vir Leila sy moet die qadha gebed vir my doen, en pwasa en as sy eendag op hajj kan gaan, onhou vir my. En sê vir Oemie ek vergiewe vir haar en ek vra haar vergifnis. *La ilahah il-lal lahu Halimul Karim; La ilaha il-lal lahu ‘Aliyyul ‘Azim.*” This is all a whisper. My throat is so dry.

“What is she saying?” George asks the midwife.

“Sy maak soeloeg. Peace. Sy sê, daar is geen God behalwe Allah, the almagtige; daar is geen God behalwe Allah, die sagmoedige.” She translates for George as I continue.

“*Subhana ‘l-laha Rabbus samawatis sab’T*” “Alle prys na Allah, die Here van die sewe hemels en die sewe aardes”

I cannot go on but hear her finish for me: “En wat ookal daar in is en wat tussen hulle is;”

All I can manage is to squeeze her hand. I see George standing.

“Help my met die kooi. Dit moet na die rigting van die kiebla wys.”

George puts Safiyya between my arm and body. I can hear her but I can't see anything. She is making gurgling sounds and her body drops its anchor in me. I can't hear her anymore, but I can feel her. Safiyya.... I don't hear, but know. They are preparing a corpse.

*

“Os moet die Toeka Manie roep om vir haar te kom was. George, jy moet die Malboet om stuur om die mense te sê daar's „n mayet hier,” Sies Ragmat says, taking charge.

“Wat is „n mayet?” George asks.

“„n Lyk. Gaan sê vir die Malboet hy moet vir die gemeenskap gaan sê en vir haar Oemie. Hulle issie de Koningh's.”

George walks out of the room, leaving Sies Ragmat in the room with Mariam and the baby. He walks out of the house and down Hanover Street to his sister, Anna's house. From higher up the troepe are coming down the street, painted faces and trumpets in hand, singing, “Daar kommie Alibama.” The street erupts as a bright shawl of colour and laughters, but George walks straight ahead. He reaches the terraced houses, broekie lace hanging from the balconies. The neighbour's son, klein Gabriel, sits bare bum on the stoep.

“Anna, Anna!” George shouts. Someone peeps out through the curtains. The door opens.

“En nou, wat gaa aan? Het Mariam die baby gehad?” Anna asks excitedly.

“Mariam is dood. Sies Ragmat praat van Malboet en ons moet die gemeenskap laat wiet.”

“Wat bedoel jy Mariam is dood? Wat het gebeur? Kom binne.” Anna gestures for George to come inside. He tells. But he talks as if it happened to somebody else. As if all these muslim names and phrases are dealing with somebody in another realm.

Anna immediately gets to the point: “Okay, gaan stuurie Pang bad news na haar familie, maar hulle ganie vir haar „n kiefait gie nie, want sy het Kris getrou. Os moet vir Father John laat wiet en reëlings tref vir die begrafnis.”

George sits silently on the couch. At a loss. Blinking his eyes as if he hopes to finally see what has just left his life in cinders. Anna sends one of her sons out to fetch the Malboet and she scribbles down the De Koningh's address on a piece of paper for him to deliver the news.

“Moenie worry nie George. Ek sal alles uitsort.”

For a long time they sit in silence, Anna rubbing George's hand.

“Waar is die kind?” she asks. George lifts his head and it is as if a little spark lits up in his face: “Fok, ek het haar vergiet by Sies Ragmat.”

He gets up and sways like he is lightheaded, then suddenly darts out of the house before there is any more conversation. He runs past the houses with children playing hokke in the street and old people hanging over their front gates smoking cigarettes. He turns into Ekhardt Street and straight in the front gate. When he gets inside, Sies Ragmat is sitting with the baby on her lap, rocking her to sleep.

“Os moet vir haar „n wet nurse kry, want sy“s honger. Ek het klaar die klonkies in die straat gestuur om vir Sanna te roep. Mariam het gesê haar naam moet Safiyya wees – Mag Allah tevrede met jou wees.”

“Maar ons issie Muslimmie, Sies Ragmat. Ek sal haar dan Sophia noem. Daai is mos die selle ding. Ek het saam met Anna gepraat, en ons gaan vir haar uit die Catholic kerk begrawe. Daai“s waar os getrou het, en haar ma het klaar gesê sy wil niks met os te doen hê nie.”

Sies Ragmat raises one eyebrow, “Sy was Muslim. Sy moet „n kiefait het net soes almal haar voorvaders.”

*

“Oemie, Pang bad news is hie byrrie deur. Hy sê hy moet vir Oemie sien,” Leila says to her mother.

“*Salaam aleikom* Gajah. Ek het slegte nuus vir die de Koningh familie. U oudste dogter, Mariam het maningal. Sy het gekraam en net te veel bloed veloor. Allah yerhama, may Allah, most merciful have mercy on her soul. Sies Ragmat said that she made her final du“aa before she left and the statement of faraj, affirming her belief in the Almighty, maar haar man gat vir haar uit die Catholic kerk begrawe,” and with that he runs off.

“*Rabbanāgh-fir Lanā Dhunūbanā Wa ‘Isrāfanā Fī Amrinā Wa Thabbit ‘Aqdāmanā Wanşurnā `Alā l-Qawmi l-Kāfirīn*, shouts Oemie. Our Lord! forgive us for our sins and wasted efforts, make our foothold sure, and give us victory over the disbelievers.” It tolls through the house. It tolls through the street. It tolls up to the clouds.

*

“What name shall be given to the child?” the old robed man asks.

“Sophia,” I answer. I nod to Louis, my brother who has agreed to be her godfather.

“The godparents may now step forward to take their vows,” says Father John. Louis and Anna step forward, Louis holding her in his arms and Anna placing her right hand on Sophie’s leg.

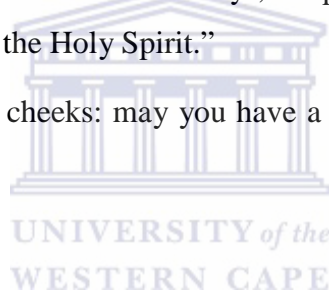
“Beloved in the Lord - he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved ... and made partakers in the meritorious redemption of Jesus Christ, taken into the society of the faithful and into the Church of Christ, fitted to obtain a share in all the treasures of grace ...”

I hope you will forgive me Mariam. I did what I thought was right.

Father John breathed on Sophia and said, “May the powers of darkness, which the divine Redeemer hath vanquished by his cross, retire before thee that thou mayest see to what hope, and to what an exceeding glorious inheritance among the saints, thou art called. ...I sign thee on the breast with the sign of the holy cross to remind thee that thou love from thy heart him who hath died on the cross for thee. *Amen.*”

Father John pours water over Sophia’s head and says, “Sophia, I baptize thee in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

George doesn’t bother to dry his cheeks: may you have a good life my little Sophia, and be cherished by all who know you.



2.7. I Hope He Still Likes Me

If anyone sees me in my school uniform, I'm in shit. Deep shit. I rip my blazer off, stick it in my bag and move down the aisles. There we go – Clicks-no-name. Should I steal it? No. If Mum has to collect me from the police station, my life is over. The lady at the counter is on her phone. Just keep cool René - she won't notice if you just keep cool.

“24 ren please,” she says without looking up. Where the hell did she have her hair done? It's that township orange you get when everyone uses the same bottle of peroxide. The gold slit in her teeth sparkles. Nokia 252 nogal! On a cashier's salary. She must be using all her wages.

I throw the box and slip in the bin outside and rush to the Fat Cactus. Ask if I can use the toilets. The stall is dirty. I don't care. I rip the paper cover off, sit down and pee on the stick. Two. Definitely two lines. Shit. This is bad. Fuck, it's really, really bad. Mum's gonna kill me. I can't tell her. Lord, please make it go away. I'll do anything. Anything. Let it just disappear...

But I guess I'll have to tell Mark.

He is smoking a cigarette on the stoep with Elton when I get to their house. “I have to talk to you alone, quickly,” I say. We walk inside and Mark sits on the leatherette couch in his mum's sitting room. Everyone else is still at work. All I can hear are the squeaks as he shuffles into place.

“What is it, babes?” he asks, frowning.

“I have something to tell you.”

What's he gonna say? Is he gonna leave me? Will he break up with me because of this?

“I'm pregnant,” I hear myself say. I feel like I'm floating above myself. From very far I hear his voice.

“Don't worry, we'll take care of it,” he says calmly. “How much will it cost?”

I look at him for the first time. Well, isn't he just Mr Fucking Fix-it! Didn't even ask what I want. No discussion. No qualms.

“I don't know. I'll find out,”

But all the same: there's no way I'm bringing a child into this world. I'm just a kid. I cannot have a baby. This I am sure about, but shouldn't one at least contemplate the situation? Ask questions. Come to terms with what one is suggesting? Maybe this is all a nightmare.

I continue to miss classes, drinking every weekend. Someone told me that people who want to get rid of unwanted babies, drink warm brandy. Clearly they were mistaken. No matter how much wishing or drinking I do, this is sticking.

Mummy threw me out of the house last week. I'm in standard 9, where the fuck was I supposed to go? Calls me out of control, and then tells everyone in the family not to take me in. I hate her fucking guts. Probably couldn't wait to get rid of me. Now she can play Brady bunch with that fucking idiot of a husband of hers. When she brought Megan home from the hospital I couldn't even look at her.

I call the Marie Stopes clinic and the lady says it'll cost R679. One week to go, then I'll never have to think about this again.

*

The taxi ride into town is awful. If I have to hear „Ghetto superstar“ again I'm gonna slit my fucking wrists. Couldn't the gaatjie have a bath before he left home? At least I've lost some weight because of all of this. I can't keep anything down. Mark is meeting me in half an hour. My skin is clammy and I'm so hot. I feel like everyone knows what I've come to do. Beady eyes judging me in silence.

In front of the fountain centre, as if they have waited especially for me, there's a church group with picket signs that read, „ABORTION IS MURDER“, and „ABORTION IS AGAINST THE WILL OF GOD“, people chanting, "Down with abortion. God does not want you to be damned." I push through the crowd and try to look as guiltless as possible. Mark is leaning against the wall in front of the building with a cigarette.

“Give me a puff,” I ask while taking the cigarette from him without waiting for a reply. I force myself to finish it. This place is grotty. The wallpaper in the passage is faded and peeling in places along the corridor. Like something from a horror movie: pale blue with the sharp smell of bleach, and navy carpet tiles. We wait for the elevator. It takes forever. I'm biting the skin around my thumb. As we push through the glass doors of the clinic, the fat

nurse with the jerry-curl looks at me with a blank face, asks me to fill in a form. Hope I don't see anyone I know.

The waiting room chairs are uncomfortable, the kind designed to make you want to stand. Planned parenting posters on the walls. I fill in the forms quickly with a lot of misinformation so that they won't be able to trace my mother. The nurse calls, "Anastacia? Anastacia Williams?" I see Mark raising an eyebrow at the name. Then he motions for me to go in alone. As I get up slowly to walk into the exam room, he casually picks up the *Sports Illustrated* swimwear issue.

I lie on the bed. The nurse is talking about doing another test just to be sure that I am really pregnant. "Spread your legs," she says. With no warning, she shoves her gloved fist into my vagina and vrotels around inside, while pushing down hard on my belly. She ties a tourniquet around my arm, sticks a needle in a bulging vein, draws some blood and asks me to pee on a stick, just to be sure.

It's positive, but we both already knew this before the second red line appeared. She „counsels“ me in monotone, reading off a scripted sheet, about what's going to happen to me, but all I hear is white noise.

“Stick this into your vagina,” she says, handing me a tiny white pill. “It'll help dilate your cervix and for the pain. Wait for ten minutes. I'll call you when we're ready.” As I insert the pill, I suddenly wondered, is it a girl or boy?

Mark is still paging through *Sports Illustrated* when I get out. He looks up briefly, acknowledging me, squeezes my hand and goes back to „reading“. I smile a tight-lipped smile. He doesn't seem too worried: too into the swimwear models.

The nurse calls the name again. Mark's not allowed in the theatre. She leads me to a tiny room. Must be three steps from door to window. The sun shining through the metal, blinds me for a second.

“Remove your bottoms and lie on the bed with your feet in the stirrups,” the burly nurse says. She looks like someone who eats sausages for breakfast. Her skin is an orangey brown and all her pores seem blocked with black gunk. I hesitate.

She snorts, “Come now, you weren't shy to open your legs for that man in there. Wil vir julle nou ko“ ougat hou.” I feel like hiding, but am in no position to argue. It's my own fault.

A pale, skinny woman in a white lab coat comes in, sits down next to me, pulls on latex gloves, rips a sachet of lubricant and smears it onto my vagina.

“So, let's see what we have here,” she says. The nurse gives her the rundown of what she's done. “Open wide,” she says, inserting the speculum. Jesus, I feel I'm being cut on all sides. Sweat covers my forehead. She cranks it open further. My vagina feels like it is tearing open.

“You can squeeze my hand but don't scream, because you'll scare the other patients,” the nurse tells me.

I freeze, as I feel a stabbing pain. The doctor inserts what looks like pliers, and seems to be breaking something apart. I hear snapping sounds. Could that be little bones? There's a sudden whirring, like someone turned on a vacuum cleaner. This is fucking horrific. My womb is contracting.

“Ahhhh!” The nurse squeezes my hand, “It's okay. She's just cleaning the womb.” My body is drenched with sweat and I feel like I'm going in and out of consciousness. The doctor moves the little suction tube relentlessly. I can't stifle a scream, “Ow!” The nurse crushes my hand, “I told you not to scream” she whispers viciously, her long polished nails digging into my hand.

I am hot and cold at once, my whole body is shaking. Oh God...when is this going to end? I'm trying to think about something else – happy times, camping trips, pony rides, but all I can feel is the tube moving inside me.

“Jeezus Christ!” I yell. The nurse is next to my face, “Don't let me have to tell you again,” she hisses, smiling politely at the doctor. The slushy noise sounds like someone vacuuming up porridge. Every part of my body convulses. There are little bits of blood and pale, transparent solid bits being sucked into a transparent bag on the table next to the doctor.

Yes, this is all your fault, my inner voice tells me. How the fuck could I have been so stupid?! Mummy always said to use condoms when I started having sex, but for Mark they didn't feel right and the latex made me itchy and sore. Too late for regrets now. They probably do this deliberately without pain relief to teach young girls a lesson.

Finally the doctor removes the tube, and unscrews the speculum, yanking it out without warning. She tears her gloves off, pulls her gown over her head and throws everything, including the bits of foetus, into a plastic bag and into the bin.

“Give me five minutes before the next one,” she tells the nurse, taking a soft pack of cigarettes out of her coat pocket. She turns to me and says, “Good luck,” - a pessimistic well wish. They both walk out.

I try to get up but can’t feel my legs. I’m alone in the room, everything’s spinning. I lie back down. The nurse comes in. “You have to go and sit in *that* room to recover,” she says, pointing to a partitioned section of the same room with a door leading out. “The next patient is coming in soon. Don’t throw up here.” She hands me a paper bag. My legs are leaden, I feel unsteady, but I manage to get up. I drag my clothes across the floor, holding onto the curtain so I don’t fall down.

Out in the waiting room the nurse comes to me. “Before you leave, take some condoms and this to prevent infection. Instructions on the bag. Don’t have sex for the next two weeks.” I take the packet. Red and black capsules. Penicillin I think.

Mark stares at me as I walk towards him. I catch a glimpse of my face in the mirror. I look haggard, like a strange person. Like I have lost myself. He gets up, takes my hand, gives a questioning nod, and heads to the counter to pay. R679, that’s what it was worth, the foetus. Or maybe I should think: it’s my life we’re saving. We leave the clinic and he hands me the receipt, “In case you want a refund,” he says with a chuckle. I lean against the aluminium framed glass doors. The protesters are still there. Straightening up I walk past them to the car, sink into the seat and turn on the radio.

“The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has closed down after two years of hearings. A report will be released in October of this year. In other news, the former mayor of Beijing has been sentenced to 16 years for graft. The British government has banned the manufacture, sale and use of land mines by its military.”

We never listen to the news. We’re headed in the direction of Seapoint promenade.

“In Algeria, 6 civilians died and 23 were injured in a night raid in Malakou village in Tiaret Province. IBM’s Russian subsidiary has agreed to pay \$8.5 million in federal fines for selling powerful computers ultimately destined for a Russian nuclear weapons laboratory. And finally, Bill Clinton has agreed to tell the truth, and the whole truth to questions raised around the Monica Lewinsky allegations.”

Finally, we're here. I need air. I walk across the pathway and sit at the edge of the concrete slab overlooking the water. Millions of sparkly lightbeams come off the water. Heavy teardrops drip down my cheeks. The water looks beautiful like this. Like looking through a fish tank. No one even knows I skipped school today. This is me. This is what I am.

"I have to get back to work", I hear a deep voice say. We've barely been here for 10 minutes. I've only had one cigarette for god's sake. Don't you give a shit about me?

"My lunch hour is over; I'll drop you at the taxi rank."

What? What the fuck! I get up, push past him and get into the passenger's seat. The drive is quick. I get out of the car and without a kiss he shuts the door, hoots and speeds off. Fucking arsehole.

A door swings open and the gaatjie shouts "Biaaville! Etlone, Gatesville, Biaaville!!" It's not full, so the driver pulls into the lot to wait. I buy a single cigarette from a street vendor and sit next to the taxi, blowing rings of smoke into the air. They float up and slowly dissipate. I wish I could do that, vanish into the ether. I wonder if anyone will ever remember me? I have become such a fucking cliché. Coloured girl from Bonteheuwel. Typical. Stereotype, not me. I want more in life than a man and a baby. Bodies file into the taxi one by one, and in no time it's almost full. I get in the front seat and we drive off.

The van stops at the nearest stop to aunty Abie's place. I get out and walk like a zombie across the field to her house. No one is home, except for the foreign exchange student she's taken in for a semester. We share a room. He doesn't talk much. He's from Brazil. I lie down on my bed, but it feels as if it is not me.

*

It's been two days since the abortion, and I could not bring myself to go back to school. Both mornings I got dressed in uniform, took a taxi to the CBD, bought movie tickets and went and stayed in the cinema all day until it was time to be home from school.

Mark is coming over this evening. I hope he'll still like me after all this.

He is early. Usually he doesn't get off work until five. He takes a few beers out of the boot and chats to aunty Abie's neighbour in the yard while they make the fire. We all sit around the fire watching the meat cook, the guys talking about cars. He says nothing to me all evening.

Just gives me a wink every now and then. I wonder what he's thinking. Does he still love me? I see things around me, hear laughter, but it sounds as though it's very far away.

Everyone starts leaving and eventually it's just me and Mark by the fire. For the first time this evening Mark looks me in the eyes. He's holding me so tightly I can hardly breathe.

"I can't wait to be inside you", he whispers. I cringe at the thought, because I still feel raw inside and he knows the doctor said to give it two weeks. I smile but don't say anything. He pushes his erection against my stomach. I feel sick.

"Come with me," he whispers, holding his finger to his lip. He leads me by the hand into the kitchen, lets down the folding table that's held up against the wall with hinges. He sets me down on it, slips my panties to one side and pushes into me hard. It hurts like hell. I groan and he puts his hand over my mouth to silence me. At least he still wants me. There's mould on the ceiling above the stove. The spotlight in the back yard shows up the dust on the glasses. I hear low grunts and a final sigh, but can't feel anything. He's done. He pulls out quickly and I'm glad it's over. I fake a smile to please him. We sleep together on the couch cushions we've laid out on the lounge floor. The rest of the weekend passes with much of the same.

Monday morning. Uncle Keith dropped me off at school today so I couldn't skip school. I'm still sore. I lean against the wall. "Where've you been? You skip school to go and have an abortion? Haha," Angus says, laughing.

I try to feign disgust, "Fuck off. Why the hell would I need to do that for?"

"I'm just kidding you idiot." He turns and walks into class.

At first break I see Kelly and Tocare in the senior quad. They are bitching about the typing teacher, Ms Bosenberg. "What's up with *you* today?" Tocare asks with a frown as I sit down next to them.

"I had an abortion," I blurted. "Mark took me last week and I feel really shit about it. No one tells you how bad it is."

"How could you do that? I would never do such a thing," Tocare says. Kelly just sits there staring at me in silence. Suddenly I feel like I'm suffocating. My heart is beating fast and my hands are sweating. Everything's spinning.

“Help me! Something's wrong with me.” They both take my arms and lift me from the ground. We stumble to the nurse's office.

“She can't breathe,” they say, handing me over before vanishing. I stagger into the room and lie down on the bed, world spinning. I close my eyes. Feels like my body's rocking from side to side.

The nurse sits down on the bed next to me. “What's the matter?”

“I'm okay. I think I just have low blood sugar,”

“Okay, I'm gonna get a glass of orange juice. Stay here.”

I lie back onto the bed and close my eyes. I hear indistinct chatter outside. After I don't know how long, she comes back and hands me a glass. “Sit up.” I drink the juice and lie down again.

“I just need to lie down for a while,” I say and turn onto my side.

The final bell wakes me and I jump up, pack my bags and walk out of the office. The nurse is gone. Tocare and Kelly are standing at the gate talking. They fall silent when I get there.

“What you talking about?”

“Nothing. What the hell happened earlier?” Tocare asks.

“Nothing, I'm okay.” We walk to the bus stop. “We didn't want to tell you this before,” Tocare says, “because I didn't want to hurt you, but we heard that Mark is screwing Melanie.” Why is she telling me this now? My head reels. She's probably lying. Why would he do something like that? I'm gonna fucking kill him if it's true.

The bus approaches our stop, but it's not my bus. The sign on the front reads „Khayelitsha“. It keeps driving at a fast pace toward the next stop. I look at the driver as it approaches. I close my eyes and see myself stepping out just before it reaches us, people screaming, “NO!” Something screeches to a halt, Tu Pac playing at full volume, the whole taxi pulsating. “Etlone, Gatesville, Biaville. Ko“ jy girl?”