

https://dspace.org/

Against the grain

Roy, Nichola Douglas

2018-02-15

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/27657

Roy, Nichola Louise (2018) Against the grain, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, https://hdl.handle.net/10539/27657

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/



AGAINST THE GRAIN

A NOVEL

BY

NICHOLA DOUGLAS ROY

As part of the requirement for a dissertation for the degree of Master of Arts by Research (Creative Writing) submitted to the Faculty of Arts, School of Literature, Language and Media, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

©Nichola Douglas Roy. Johannesburg, 2018

Student number: 402279

Faculty of Humanities

School of Literature, Language and Media

SENATE PLAGIARISM POLICY

Declaration by Student

I, Nichola Roy, Student Number 402279, (reflected as Nichola Douglas Roy on the title of this work) am a student registered for MA Creative Writing for the period 2015 to 2017 (last thesis submission date being 15 February 2018).

I hereby declare the following:

1. I am aware that all plagiarism (the use of someone else's work without their permission and/or without acknowledging the original source) is wrong.
2. I confirm that all work submitted for the assessment of the above course is my own unaided work except where I have explicitly stated otherwise.
3. I have followed the required conventions in referencing the thoughts and ideas of others.
4. I understand the University of Witwatersrand may take disciplinary action against me if there is a belief that this is not my own unaided work or that I have failed to acknowledge the source of the ideas or work in my writing.

SIGNED

_____

NICHOLA DOUGLAS ROY

9 February 2018

For my children - Dan, Lou and Stu

As tempting as it is for me to wish for the wind to always be at your backs, such children do not grow into good adults. So I devote this work to you along with my wish that you each face your own headwinds with courage and honesty.

FOREWORD

This story is set in a South African school that may seem familiar to some. But the events that take place are as fictional as the characters. It is hoped that readers will find allegory in the setting rather than presuming that this is about any particular school. Perhaps some readers may even go so far as to think that this tale is about more than teenagers in schools. After all, stories like this happen every day, everywhere.

All this pitting of sex against sex, of quality against quality; all this claiming of superiority and imputing of inferiority, belong to the private-school stage of human existence where there are "sides," and it is necessary for one side to beat another side, and of the utmost importance to walk up to a platform and receive from the hands of the Headmaster himself a highly ornamental pot.

Virginia Woolf
A Room of One's Own

The sound of sawing overhead has increased. All the searchlights are erect. They point at a spot exactly above this roof. At any moment a bomb may fall on this very room. One, two, three, four, five, six … the seconds pass ... All feeling, save one dull dread, ceased. A nail fixed the whole being to one hard board.

Virginia Woolf
Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid

PROLOGUE

GRACE

A place that stares down change

As she drives through the gates, a guard snaps a salute to accompany his grin. It happens every time. Such dissonant movements, as if there were an invisible puppeteer pulling his strings. The car registration number is captured on CCTV. That keeps everyone safe in here, although threats to safety don't always come from outside.

The plaque at the entrance reads

> *Enter these gates with humility, determined to contribute to, and to take advantage of, all that this institution offers, and depart knowing that you are well equipped to forge your future in the world.*

It's affixed to the moss-covered stone gatepost. Although it is large, she wonders if any visitors ever notice it. She's always considered it an unspoken part of her job to ensure that the boys who come here leave understanding these ideals. She's used class setworks and poetry to hint at the thoughts embodied in those words often enough. But she's come to suspect that humility is a recessive gene in the DNA of the wealthy, and so the lessons she's tried to teach haven't always been learned easily or fast. And sometimes, it seems, not at all.

Her Sunday Blues aren't helped by the first wisps of mist that ghost towards her headlights. Do the boys know they're not the only ones who suffer from it? She has to slow down for a car up ahead. She's seen it every time – anyone driving into Hill House for the first time is awed. Even if the drivers don't notice the quiet signs politely asking them to please slow down, they do so anyway. Just to take it all in. She tries to remember what it felt like to be a newcomer here.

She comes to a turn in Warrior's Way. For a moment, where there's a gap between the old plane trees on the road, if you stop, it allows a glimpse beyond the white Cape Dutch buildings resting comfortably on the mowed lawns like landed gentry. From this point, like the view from the top dormitories of the first four boarding houses, there's a perfect westerly view of cows grazing in fields in the foreground and the Drakensberg foothills in the distance. It allows a perspective towards what lies beyond this school, and the view hints at a bigger world that tracks the sun's north-westward arc beyond the Berg and up to Johannesburg.

She drives past the Bell Tower, in front of the academic block and the Headmaster's office. His light is on. Always on, poor man. A young boy swings on the bell rope and it begins to chime as if to welcome her. A cluster of passing boys wave and pick up their pace to get to evensong in time. She waves back and smiles.

She never tires of the dramatic change in the topography and vegetation at this bend. She passes the remaining three boarding houses that perch on the escarpment, which drops off sharply to the Umgeni River Valley. The refined Englishness of the hydrangeas, irises and azaleas that grow in broad swales under deep shade have now given way to a rugged African landscape. She likes the metaphor of the place and wonders if any other staff members have noticed that the school is as Anglo-African in its vegetation as it is in its ethos. Aloes and fever trees stand in front of a rocky precipice and in the distance is the valley. If you stand still for a moment and watch, you will probably see zebra or warthog or wildebeest down below.

She stops at her driveway to allow a second group of scruffy, grinning boys to cross in front of her. They scuttle past, looking sunburnt and guilty as they pull up their ties and tuck in the shirts of their Number Ones. She waves, ignoring that they'll be late for chapel.

Looking down her driveway she sees her home in darkness. She's not ready to face an empty home right now. Maybe, if she drives the remainder of Warrior's Way loop and comes back round again, the twins will get back before her. She continues past her gate and pretends not to see three junior boys duck behind the thatched rondavel of the wildlife centre. They've done their own kind of worshipping today, in the veld on the estate. Good enough for her.

She drives a bit faster and is relieved not to find any more truant boys she pretends not to see. She passes the aquatics centre, the indoor sports centre, the squash courts, several rugby and cricket fields, the driving range and the Old Boys Club. Each field or building is neatly signposted by black wrought iron posts with the same quiet, white writing. It's been a while since she wondered about the people the fields are named after. Names like Ogilvie, Graham, Armstrong – a mixture of old headmasters or beloved, long-standing ex-teachers, or benefactors who had donated the money to build them.

The mist thickens. Why does it always seem to choose a Sunday evening? Even on clear days it's hard to see much beyond the buildings and vegetation and past the outer perimeter of most of Warrior's Way. Maybe that's why so few visitors have looked beyond the perfect facilities to the small houses of service staff in the Teapots Valley. These are carefully tucked on the edge of the estate, behind the school's forest. Perhaps it's easier for the visitors to look inwards? To face the other way.

If you look the other way, to the middle of the school campus, on a normal school day, you'll almost always see clusters of strolling boys. All dressed in saggy khaki shorts and shirts, as if they're troupes of young soldiers in some far-flung colonial war from the last century. They slop along in shoes known as JCs – Jerusalem Cruisers – cheap brown plastic slip-ons. JCs are the big craze at the moment among the cool girls at St Agnes down the road. The girls love them, not because they're pretty. They're a badge of honour to signify a boyfriend at Hill House.

In the mornings the boys carry a few books under their arms; in the afternoon they may have a pair of rugby boots slung round their necks by the laces as they jog barefoot towards the fields. But they're never laden with too much stuff. It's an easy walk from the boarding houses to anywhere else. Most of the teachers and their families live on the campus too, in neat homes down Laundry Lane. So the campus is almost a car-free zone during the week where all faces are familiar. When parents and visitors arrive on Saturdays to watch sport, though, the whole place goes up a notch – the lawns are more closely mown, the boys walk a little faster and the staff step out in matching sports wear and reprimand boys for untucked shirts. She smiles at the memory of her twins standing in the driveway and playing car cricket on Saturdays with Holly as umpire. Detailed analysis and debate took place in those early days about points allocated to Porsches that struggled to climb speed humps, versus Land Rovers that didn't even notice them.

She's almost back at the beginning of her loop when the main rugby field comes into view. In the early days, as a new staff member coming to grips with the school's ethos, she quickly realised that it was no architectural accident that at the very heart of the school lies the famous Kidd Rugby Field. Yes, the chapel is close enough to the centre, and that was deliberate too, being an Anglican school. But anyone who spends any time here knows there is a more fanatical kind of worship of fifteen guys each Saturday on that field, rather than the worshipping that goes on in the chapel next door at compulsory Sunday evensong. Only first team rugby players may walk that hallowed field and they tread each step knowing their heroes have taken that same path ahead of them. They learn the names of previous Springboks from Hill House in their new boys' test and they understand it is their duty to continue the proud tradition. Beneath the grandstand on the west side of the field is their change room. Only those fifteen and their coaches enter that sacred space every Saturday for those fourteen short winter weeks of the year.

A member of the rugby team always seems to sit at the top of some invisible power pyramid. It's been like that at Hill House forever and nothing's likely to change any time soon, from what she's seen. Behind these boys, waiting in the wings, are parents who, in the pursuit of stardom for their sons, will do whatever is required. The most commanding children inside here usually have the most commanding parents out there. An implicit birthright. And for these parents to do the job of raising these boys to maintain that position clearly requires time, money, and guile in vast quantities. But around here, those resources aren't in short supply. Well, not for the boys' parents anyway.

Her second loop of Warrior's Way now complete, she returns home to see the house still in darkness and quiet. She resolves that she may as well confront that reality. She drives down her driveway and parks her car. She drops her keys on the kitchen table and stands in the darkness for a moment. The house creaks its familiar creaks and she inhales its smells. She tries for a moment, then gives up in her effort to separate the scents of stale laundry from musty textbooks. These, like the memories they evoke, struggle to be split up. She settles into her knowledge that this is just the smell of home. As she steps, she stumbles over a cricket bat, stubs her toe and silently curses. She flicks the light switch and her heart double-thumps as she sees Holly's beanie and scarf on the table. Did she forget them, or leave them behind at the last moment on purpose? She winds her fingers in the wool, lifts them to her face and whispers into their softness. "Wind be always at your back, my child."

She fills the kettle and sees groups of Hill House boys drift past her window on their way back from evensong. Some joke and shove and chatter as they pass. Others stroll alone. This isn't the place for everyone, but what it stands for makes it a place where most boys would want to come to learn and become young men. It's a place where almost any teacher would want to come and teach and raise a family. A place where any parent who can afford to would want to send a son.

Nobody admits to it, but everyone knows it feels comfortable here because it's a place that stares down change. Maybe this is good enough for her, this place on the outskirts of a South African village whose steady pulse has sustained for nearly two hundred years? She drops a tea bag into a mug and pours water over it, floats milk over the top and watches the two colours swirl and settle into one another. She removes the teabag with a teaspoon and sits at the kitchen table thinking about the peaks and troughs of sadness that have sat alongside her here. If she is going to move through this new, sad wave, this is the best place for that to happen. There is no point trying to run from sadness.

She cups the mug in her hands, blows across the surface of the tea, and thinks about this tucked-away corner of the earth. She makes peace, for now, with the fact that this is home for her, if not for everyone.

CHAPTER 1

HOLLY

The security branch

It was Berg wind season. This was the coolest place to be on those days. As she sat there, midway up the tallest tree on the campus, next to the bell tower on the front lawn, she thought about the possibility that this might be the last time she'd be there for a while, with final school exams looming. Her favourite spot was a broad bough about halfway up that reached out over the road. She rested her back against the trunk. Then along the length of the broad flat branch – the perfect size for her bum – she stretched her legs out straight. Sometimes, when she was younger, she would hear the loud shout of a group of boys from up there and she'd scuttle all the way up and peek her head out the top to see what the excitement was about. But she'd stopped doing that now because she'd learned that it's usually over a caught ball or a brutal tackle. Watching bunches of school boys making rowdy schoolboy fusses over the same kinds of schoolboy things didn't intrigue her much anymore. These days she was happy to perch invisibly in the middle of the tree to escape the boys.

She looked at her little supply left up there over the years, tucked into a Tupperware and wedged into the V of two branches near her seat. Just a few essentials – a corner of old carpet, a notebook, pencil, torch, Mum's threadbare anthology of Romantics poetry, a pressed daisy and a laminated photo of Sarge as a puppy that was a bookmark from prep school days.

'Look Boy, look how cute you were,' she held up the photo to show Sarge his portrait. He looked up at her from the base of the tree and wagged on cue.

Should she take this all down now, seeing as she wouldn't get there any time soon? She decided there was no harm leaving it up there till the end of term, just in case she ventured another visit or two. After all it had been her best place to do a final run through of notes and summaries on evenings before tests.

A light breeze caught the leaves and they flapped near her face. She thought back to her first visit there all those years ago. It was hot and windy and in the school holidays, just like today. Mum was grumpy and trying to settle the whining, niggly twins into their afternoon nap.

'C'mon Holly, it's far too hot inside. We're going to climb trees,' Dad had said. She watched him hoist himself up into the lowest branches. It looked so silly watching a grown-up look for firm footing and dangling from a tree.

‘Check this out. You’ve gotta get up here!’ He reached down his hand and hauled her up to join him and then moved his way up from branch to branch, occasionally turning to check on her and tell her where to place her feet. They hadn’t been living there long and were still a new family to the school. As they reached the higher branches, a view over the valley appeared.

‘Now this is a great secret place for a girl who’s going to need the occasional escape from all these boys … It’s like a queendom!’ he said. He straddled a branch and helped her to sit down next to him. ‘Look,’ he pointed to the other side of the valley, then swivelled around and held a branch aside and pointed again, ‘And look there, you can almost see your whole domain.’

She liked that Dad never invited the twins up there, even when they were big enough to climb the tree. There were other trees where he took them and taught them all to play itchy ball wars in the plane trees. But this old oak became her secret place, and there was an unspoken family rule that her brothers were never allowed to disturb her there. When she felt overcrowded, he seemed to know it was time, and he’d take her up there. He also gave it another name.

‘It’s time for a visit to the Security Branch,’ he’d say, ‘just to gain some perspective.’ She loved that name long before she understood it. It made sense. She always felt secure up there with him and then, without him. But it was only after he died and she’d learnt a bit more of South Africa’s history that she came to understand that the name, Security Branch, had another, more sinister meaning. But she never got to speak to him about that, to ask him if he intended it to have another ironic meaning. Did he call it that because he knew she would also go and sit up there to spy on the boys who wandered beneath her? It wasn’t like she was hiding, it was just that they never bothered to look up. As a daughter of two teachers, she understood she was different from most of the others. She had been taught to notice things and to express what she saw carefully. In full, grammatical sentences. From up there she discovered she could do this without feeling like the oddball most boys around here seemed to think she was.

She had lost count of the times she’d been hiding in plain sight on this campus and had watched boys shove and swear like boys love to do in packs. There seemed to be no boys who were good noticers.
She heard the faint rumble of a bus.

There had been an evening when Dad had stood on a spot not far away and looked at her and her brothers over the top of his glasses in silence until they'd all stopped walking.
Then he'd begun in a pompous accent.

'I imagine it was about here that the founding fathers of this school stood and plotted. Like all men with ambitious visions, they briefed the original architects with vivid and precise details.' The twins had cackled at his act and stopped fidgeting to listen further.

'Just think, a gentleman benefactor probably sat right here, one hundred and forty-seven years ago, on his shooting stick, and insisted that the last backward glance and benign smile of the sun as it makes its evening Berg summit and trudge across the Highveld should always fix on his descendants in Upper House and their equally privileged friends.' Graham – G – tried to copy his father's round sound, 'shooooting stick …' as he held an invisible gun in his hands and aimed at a flock of Sacred Ibises that drifted east over the school buildings.

'That's a gun, not a shooting stick, idiot,' said Thomas – T – and crossed his legs and mimicked a lean against a shooting stick, as if to explain, 'for cricket, silly!'

'Same diffs, Smarty Pants,' said G and yanked T by the sleeve. 'Race you to the Bell Tower.'

'So is not!' yelled T as they elbowed and belted down the road together. She leaned her head into his shoulder.

'You're so good at stories, Dad. Tell me another.'

'That's in my job description, Hol! Not surprising I'm a storyteller, I guess? History's nothing more than a bunch of stories. I've had to get good at it – keeps all my boys interested.'

He tucked her under his arm. They walked on, following the twins round the bend towards home.

Two busses rolled up below her and parked in a row, one behind the other. The one was from Johannesburg and the other from Durban, and they were returning the boarders to school for the final term. Boys tumbled out and shoved their way towards the storage section underneath the bus to grab their bags. Sarge stirred from his doze and gave a half-hearted attempt at a welcome bark.

'Have some respect for Seniors, okes,' muttered a boy in a braided blazer. Boys queued in sulky silence and scrolled through their cell phones while standing back for the biggest boys. As soon as most of the seniors had moved off, the order broke down and they began pushing each other again.

‘Slowly! No need for this boys, your bags aren’t going anywhere,’ said the one bus driver. Nobody paid much attention to him and they continued to yank at the pile of bags all at once. The stream of boys leaving the busses slowed to a trickle. Sarge waddled amongst them and sniffed their bags. He cocked his leg.

‘Hey, piss off, Sarge!’ yelled a boy and lurched at him in time to change his plan. As the resident school mascot they all knew him and his territorial habits too well. The last few boys emerged wiping sleep from their eyes and stretching. Earphones hung from some of their ears.

She dangled one foot off the side of her branch and flapped her slip-slop against her foot, tempting someone to look up. She watched the last few boys bicker and jostle over luggage. Their ways were so predictable. If only girls were as obvious as boys.

‘My boys,’ Dad always called them. Did he really think of every boy that way? She never heard him speak of them as anything else. He seemed to love them all. Her slip-slop dropped off her foot and landed on the grass below the tree. Most of the boys had shuffled off, lugging bags, pushing and joking their way back to their houses. One boy turned from collecting his bag and looked at the shoe. She tucked her leg up onto the branch and sat still. He made a show of fiddling with his bag and waited for the last boys to move off before bending down and picking up the slop. He held it delicately on top of one open palm and cupped his second palm beneath the first. He turned and reached his arms out above his bowed head as if to make an offering to a monarch.

‘I think a princess may have dropped her slipper?’

As he turned his face to look up at her she recognised him. Oh hell, why did it have to be Duncan Chylde? Just her luck to have the rugby captain discover her. The guy was known to the whole world as Dodge, or certainly to every St Agnes girl and Hill House boy. What would he go back to his friends and say about finding a matric girl sitting up a tree like some silly kid? And, to make matters worse, this was the second time. The last time he’d come across her she was up a different tree. She felt herself blush as she remembered the tail end of the last game she had played with her brothers. That time Mum was marking tests and insisted they take their noise outside and leave her in peace. She thought of explaining, of saying something like ‘Despite what it looks like, I don’t actually live in trees all the time’, but she lost her nerve. It would sound lame. She imagined some of her friends at school if she told them this. Definitely not a story to repeat. They would all get themselves into a hysterical froth.

‘Sorry, didn’t mean to drop it … You can leave it there, I’ll collect it on my way home,’ she said.

‘Ah, you again, Blue Roses. Different tree though … It’s no bother. Want me to climb up there to return it to you?’ he said and gave her a crooked grin. His one raised eyebrow insinuated itself into an arch that silently said so much.

‘Super, we’re dealing with a charmer,’ she muttered. His choice of nickname made her feel flustered. He’d obviously been doing some background research on her.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that?’ he said.

‘I said, I think I’ll manage to pick it up. I might even manage to slip my own delicate little toes into it all by myself. But thanks for the offer to rescue me.’

‘Suit yourself,’ he said. ‘Sorry, I’m cool that way – always on the lookout for a princess to save.’

‘Ugh,’ she said and turned to look out over the valley in mock exasperation. She wished she could think of a witty retort. When she felt it was safe to look again she saw him walking away, his bag slung sloppily over his shoulder, and he seemed to kick an invisible stone down Warrior’s Way. She’d seen his sort before. Mind you, in all her years of watching them, she’d seen almost every sort.

She dropped down out of the tree and saw her slip-slop leaning neatly against the base of the trunk. She bent down to pick it up and noticed three yellow veld daisies twisted into a little rope and wrapped around the toe strap. She watched him walk away with Sarge at his heels, presumably in the hopes of being handed a left-over scrap from his empty packet of bus tuck that he carried in one hand.

‘Sarge,’ she called, ‘c’mon Boy.’ He stopped and bent down to Sarge. He massaged his head and lifted his floppy Beagle ear and whispered something into it, then stood up and strolled away without looking back.

‘Cute,’ she caught herself saying out loud.

CHAPTER 2

DODGE

The bits that made her interesting

It didn't start as a dare or a competition. He liked her. She was pretty, in an unusual way, but that wasn't it. Pretty girls were everywhere. At St Agnes it was hard to find any other kind. Their teeth were all orthodontically straightened, their skin dermatologically purified, their weight seemed guided by a dietician's recommendations and exercise regimens, their hair was long and straight, and mostly blonde. But they sounded the same. Their flat voices dropped i's with slight lisps, and used the same words. They flashed smiles at the same things and they giggled in harmony. No, there were probably prettier girls, in their own self-conscious ways. So being pretty wasn't what made her interesting. The first time he saw her, Holly was yelling at her twin brothers from the top of a plane tree.

'Cut it out, you little dickheads!' She looked like an exotic bird, a strange parrot perhaps, that had flown off course and was standing on a branch and trying to figure her bearings. Her voice was deep and raspy. She cackled and yelled. They scurried below her on the ground. There was a war game on the go. All three were oblivious to the passing schoolboys on their way to afternoon sports practices.

He stopped to watch for a moment on his way to rugby. He liked to arrive early at practice so he could warm up and stretch before the start, so he had a bit of extra time. This looked like fun. So what if he wasn't early for once?

They were pelting her with plane tree pods. He couldn't really tell the boys apart – one was the loader and the other the shooter. Everyone knew the Weaver twins, but very few could tell the difference. They were both wearing a set of rubber kitchen gloves and gumboots. One was scrambling around the foot of the tree gathering pods and piling them at his brother's feet in stacks, like a squirrel gathering nuts. The other was poised, like an archer, one knee on the ground, the other bent in front of him, and was stretching his catapult back, shooting the pods at his target and reloading in a rhythm that made it look like a dance.

'Swap, swap! It's my turn now,' badgered the collector.

'Wait! Five more,' said the shooter. After five shots they swapped and continued, no arguments – disciplined soldiers who were quick, with accurate aims. Holly began taunting them.

‘Missed! Try again suckers!’ Then she stood on the branch and bounced up and down, pods hailing down on her brothers. ‘Keep it coming. Is that your best effort?’

‘Hey you,’ she yelled at Dodge while bouncing on the branch and dodging the incoming pods, ‘this isn’t a spectator sport. Pick a team or piss off.’ He moved closer to the battleground.

‘Are you saying you need help?’

‘Does it look like I’m losing from that cheap seat?’ she called down without looking at him. ‘Ouch!’

‘Actually, I’d say the score’s about even.’

‘Well then, stay right where you are and watch how it’s done.’ She dodged a pod and wobbled, almost falling off the branch. ‘In fact, boys, I’ll donate him to your team. You need it. Pull up a chair Duncan, you’ve just been promoted to the bench. Congratulations.’

‘How do you know my name?’ he joined in, scrambling to gather ammunition. He liked that she called him by his real name and not his nickname – it sounded authoritative and formal. Sort of old-fashioned. She didn’t answer.

He tried to remember the twins’ names. They always travelled as an indistinguishable pair and he’d never heard them called anything other than G’nT. They continued their assault and one yelled.

‘Quick Dodge, we’re running out of ammo!’ He checked that none of his friends were watching. The coast was clear. He made a pocket out of the front of his T-shirt with one hand and loaded the pods with the other.

‘I wouldn’t suggest you do that,’ she called and ducked. A pod hit her arm. ‘Damn you, G!’

‘Do what?’

‘Pick those up with your bare hands.’ The twins continued their assault. Another hit. ‘Eina! Why am I helping the enemy? Actually, go right on, pick up some more, sucker! Pile them in there. In fact let me help you.’ She bounced the branch with her skinny legs again and pods fell from the tree onto the three boys below again.

‘Time Out! Time Out!’ yelled a twin who had taken a hit in the eye.

‘Ugh! You’re such babies.’ She sat down with her legs balanced along the length of the branch and leaned her back on the trunk. She crossed her arms. ‘I’ve got all the time in the world, take as long as you need, guys!’ Dodge began scratching one palm of his hand with the other.

‘Don’t do that,’ said one twin.

‘Uh oh, too late,’ said the other, as he took the back of his hand to his eye and began rubbing.

‘I’m guessing you’re from Jo’burg,’ she said and began picking her teeth with a twig. It didn’t sound like a compliment.

‘How d’you know?’ he began scratching the back of his neck. His eyes began to water. ‘Because you signed up for an itchy ball war without protective clothing,’ she said and jumped down from the branch. She landed next to him on all fours, like a cat jumping out a tree. She dusted off her hands and stood up straight. ‘Rookie error.’ She walked over to a bank of succulent plants in the shrubs nearby and pulled a bunch of leaves off the bush and snapped them in two.

‘Here, rub these on the itchy bits.’ She handed him a few oozing leaves. He began to apply the plant serum to his hands, neck, arms. ‘That should keep the itch at bay until you get to the San. Ask Sister for an antihistamine and you’ll be good for practice.’ She was barefoot, and wore a pair of boy’s navy rugby practice shorts that were covered in pollen from the pods. She wore an opaque pair of surgical gloves. Her T-shirt was short and a narrow waist peeked out with a stomach dusted by freckles. Her shirt had a faded logo that said ‘Drama Queen’ and a crown in faded pink above the letters. She began picking bits of pollen off herself.

‘You’ll probably need eye-drops. Try not to scratch.’ The twins stood by giggling and nudging and whispering to each other behind cupped hands.

‘Thanks … I think.’

He wanted to run and dash behind a building to tear at his skin. Instead he strolled down the road towards the San trying to look casual, looking down as he passed boys so they wouldn’t see his rashes and swollen eyes. As he turned into the San building he looked back, hoping she was watching him. She was further up the road from where they had parted and was pelting pods at her brothers with her bare hands. They were using their rubber gloves to bat the pods away. It was obvious they had continued as soon as he’d left the battlefield and were not interested in the fate of a wounded soldier.

He saw her once or twice at a distance on campus over the next few weeks. He happened to watch her perform a drama monologue and she was brilliant. A few days later he made some excuse to knock on her door when he’d spotted her mother and brothers driving out, so he thought he might catch her alone. He wanted to tell her how good her performance was and to find out more about that play. But when she came to the door in her school uniform and her bare feet with her hair tied up in a messy ponytail, he only handed her the ball he had under his arm and told her he thought it was her brothers’ that they’d obviously kicked over

the fence. He had a few other plans to bump into her, but they also fell flat, so all he got to do was send her a Facebook friend request. As days passed the idea of trying to make an effort to find her again and speak to her began to feel awkward. The term ended quickly and it was too full of rugby practice, and then the holidays came. But now, on the first day back of the final term of his school career, there she was again. Up a tree, again. He began to scheme. It would need to be soon. School was almost over. Forever. As he walked he composed a WhatsApp message to his dorm-mate Brad Hay. Brad and Holly had grown up together on this campus. Brad would have her number.

CHAPTER 3

HOLLY

A run usually clears the head

She crept in through the kitchen door and tiptoed upstairs into the bathroom. She shut the door quietly behind her before she ran the shower at a trickle so as not to make any noise. She lost track of how long she stood as the water washed over her. She didn't recall sitting down, but became aware that she must have when she began to shiver as the geyser ran out and the water turned cold.

She slept in snatches through the night. She also crept to Mum's bedroom door. Twice. But she knew if she crossed that threshold she'd want to slide into the bed next to her and begin to explain. Telling Mum what had happened would be hard enough. Doing it in the middle of the night from the place where Dad would be, if he were still alive, was unimaginable. Like confessing her shame to his ghost. So she returned to her own bed for a while and waited for a suggestion of light to glimpse around the edges of her curtains. She tiptoed down the passage to the back door. Dad's sturdy words whispered in her memory, 'The world is an easier place to fathom on a run to Beacons'.

Sarge's tail thumped against the side of his basket as she opened the door between the back door and the dark garage. He knew what her running shoes and shorts meant. He yipped and circled himself while she tied her laces, touched her toes and made quick gestures at stretches before the garage door opened. He raced off ahead as she trotted up the driveway and towards the gate onto the estate.

She set out on the dirt road to Beacons. Her breathing was shallow and nervous. It was earlier than usual. A thick, dim morning hung in front of her. Should she have left a note for Mum? She stopped, thought of turning back. No, if she went back inside there was a risk she'd wake her and she wasn't ready to face that yet. She needed to sort her thoughts first. Mum would probably guess she'd gone for a run. She set off again into the pre-dawn and hoped Mum would figure out where she was.

Her feet didn't need clear light to find their way on this familiar stretch. She found an even rhythm. Her legs felt strong. She reeled past regiments of plantation wattle standing silent in the windless gloom. Even the troupe of monkeys who usually tight-roped their way in the trees along part of her route weren't ready to perform yet.

Purblinded by the low sun, she squinted at a group of silhouettes walking towards her from the horizon. Grey dust puffed at their heels and their voices clattered towards her. It

looked like two or three people. Most likely service staff making their way to work. She called to Sarge whose body had followed his nose off the road into a patch of ferns.

'Heel, Boy.' He turned and raced to her side, yielding uncharacteristic obedience. Perhaps his ear was tuned to her tension.

'Haauw, slendaa!' quipped one and another chuckled. 'Suka!' came a third voice. The one she thought was a woman at first, turned out to be a man with a deep laugh. They continued to chat in loud, cheerful voices and their bodies trudged up the hill towards her. She held her course and pace.

'Here, Sarge-boy,' she murmured and patted her thigh. He looked up to her, as if to say, 'I've got this', and cantered in tandem with her.

She tried to calm herself. Breathe and run. But she was feeling irrational fear. She had run this path alone on the estate countless times. She had passed masses of forest workers alone before. She had felt safe here always, even as a small girl. What happened couldn't make her scared of the whole world. She, of all people, knew now that the bad guys don't always come from expected places. Turns out baddies don't look like we imagine in our childish nightmares. And besides, what was the worst that could happen? She was broken anyway. So what if she was left on the side of some forest path? Maybe it would be a relief, in a way. Not brave enough to come up with a better solution, she ran towards them. As they came close enough for her to make out their faces, she heard him.

'Holly, so early?'

'Justice? Hello. Sorry, I didn't realise it was you – you were silhouetted against the sun … Yep, I couldn't sleep.' She stopped as she got to the group. She kept a few feet between herself and them. Sarge halted at her side and his low growl warned them.
'Qhubeka ngaphandle kwami' – go ahead without me, he said to his friends who were happy to put more distance between themselves and the dog. They smiled and greeted her with no words, a half-salute, half-wave, eyeing Sarge as they backed away. She nodded back at them and knelt to restrain Sarge by his collar. She watched them move off. It took her a moment to work out what was different about Justice.

'Ngizohlangana nawe phambili' – I'll catch up to you later, he yelled at the others who were now hovering at the top of the hill. They turned and walked off.

That's what felt odd, she realised. She'd never once heard him speak isiZulu. He'd always yielded to English around her. They stood for a while in a silence that felt strange.

'Holly, you okay?'

'I'm fine.' Was it that obvious?

‘When I saw you last night …’

Now she remembered. She had run into him on her way home. Sarge had sensed him before she did, and had howled into the mist and run ahead as she was cutting across the cricket oval and running home. She’d started as he emerged out the shadows in his security uniform and she’d shrieked. She never stopped to explain and ran off sobbing. He’d called after her. There was no way she could explain. No way he would understand.

‘Oh yes, that.’ She hesitated and looked away as she stammered. ‘Sarge was restless in the storm … He got out the garage and went on a rampage around the school, you know, howling at the lightning, waking everyone up.’

‘I was worried about you.’

‘I had to go and find him, call him home. I over-reacted, sorry.’ She fiddled with her watch. ‘I’m a drama queen, what can I say?’ she tried a smile with a shrug and felt like a bad actor.

‘Shesha, Justice!’ – hurry up, called the others in chorus.

‘Hamba!’ – go, he replied. They both watched as he made piles of dust with his left foot. ‘Holly, I can help you. Do you need my help?’

‘You better go, Justice,’ her eyes begged him not to ask for more information. She shook each leg to keep them warm and feigned impatience, exaggerated a few stretches and glanced at her watch. He stood still. Said nothing. Held her gaze as if to demand a confession.

‘Sizoba late, Justice’ – we’ll be late, called the one with the girl’s silhouette.

‘Holly, I’m your friend. You know that, hey?’

‘Thanks. Ja, I guess … I must go,’ her voice rasped and she turned so he wouldn’t see her puddled eyes. She took a few steps at a walk then broke into a jog down the hill. She waved without looking back. Breathe and run. She sensed he had not moved and was watching her steps dodge loose clods and ruts in the road. Keep going. Breathe and run. Then she heard his feet scratch the path as he turned and scrambled up the hill calling, ‘Shesha’ – hurry!

Should she turn and stop him? She thought back on their friendship and was relieved to find her thoughts travelling in that direction. She had thought of nothing else but the events of last night that kept playing themselves over and over in her mind, like a video clip that buffers and won’t load properly. She forced herself to concentrate on her memories of Justice as she ran at a steady pace.

They had made friends so easily and accidentally. One day in the school holidays she’d woken to the sound of sweeping in the driveway. The rhythm of the brushstrokes had

sounded shorter and faster than normal. Gogo's sweep strokes had soft, long swishes to them, punctuated by a double tap every few swishes. This was faster and the stiff grass bristles scraped the bricks on the driveway harder. She lay in bed singing Paul Simon's song softly in time to the broom strokes,

She's a rich girl
She don't try to hide it
Diamonds on the soles of her shoes
He's a poor boy
Empty as a pocket
Diamonds on the soles of her shoes.
Sing tanana, tananaaa
Diamonds on the soles of her shoes.

A new sweep stroke meant a new sweeper. G and T had also figured that part out. They were there already, both sitting with their candyfloss hair on the back step outside the kitchen, staring at a boy who was pretending not to notice his audience as he swept. He was wearing too-big khaki shorts that were hooked up almost under his armpits and tied in place with a tie that she recognised as something Dad used to wear. His T-shirt was as sunny and clean as the shy, gap-toothed smile he gave her as she jammed herself onto the back step next to the twins. The way he worked that broom and herded those leaves made her wish she could have a turn. It was like a dance. She wondered how long she and the twins had sat there staring in silence before Mum called from inside.

'Kids, I'm sure you've got big plans for the day, so you'd better fill up on a good breakfast.' As Mum appeared over the half door she said, 'What are you staring at?' She paused, then said, 'Oh Justice, hi. It's so nice to see you again after so long. I'm sure you won't remember me, you were such a tiny tot …'. All gushy and trying too hard. She called over her shoulder, 'Gogo, how old was Justice when I last saw him? Two? Three? Maybe a little more?'

'Four or five Nkosasane,' said Gogo and she came to the back door and gestured to Justice to take off his cap from behind Mum.

'Hello Ma'am,' he muttered as he whipped off his cap and looked at his feet, folding the cap over and over in his hands. But his shoulders stayed square and his neck stayed long, and a gap-toothed smile split open his smooth face. His teeth were as square and white as the tiles in the bathroom.

‘Gogo told me you were coming, but I’d forgotten exactly when. What a lovely surprise. My lot will be so pleased to have a new friend for the holidays. Kids, I don’t think you’ve met Justice, have you? Or when you did you were too small. Anyway, Justice, you need some breakfast too. Come on.’

Mum introduced Justice to them, doing the whole family-tree-and-cv-thing in that way that parents always do when they want you to be nice to a stranger. She prattled on.

‘Gogo’s and Mkhulu’s grandson … Lives with them in the Teapots Valley … Sweet Waters Primary School …’ She recognised now that it was all badly concealed code for, ‘Now make an effort with the sweet little grandson of your nanny’.

He never looked up, just shifted from foot to foot and stared at his takkies. But as they got up to move into the kitchen he smiled another shy, gap-toothed smile, neatly placed the broom against the wall next to the back door and followed them to the kitchen table. He stared at his lap and fidgeted while Mum and Gogo worked as a team to dish up eggs, bacon, toast and tomato Smash. Mum put the plates in front of each of them and Gogo said to Justice, ‘asiyidle ngulube’ – we don’t eat pig, as she removed the bacon strips from his plate and popped them onto Holly’s. His eyes, his knife, his fork and his open mouth followed the bacon and she wanted to pass it back to him. Gogo gave her one of those Gogo looks and she thought better of it.

Then he waited with his hands in his lap until they all started eating and he watched them for a while before taking up his own knife and fork and clumsily sawing at his toast.

‘It’s rude to hold your knife and fork like spanners,’ G said to him.

‘G, it’s ruder to make our guest feel uncomfortable. You’re not the parent. Now eat your breakfast please,’ Mum spoke over him.

She couldn’t remember exactly what shifted things or how many days it took. But somewhere along that summer holiday when there was nothing to do and nowhere to go their polite association drifted into a friendship. Then over the years she heard Justice copy accents, make perfect birdcalls, chatter like a vervet monkey, copy an old man’s walk and perfect Gogo’s stern look when she meant business. She learnt that mimicry was his game. He didn’t need to be told twice how to hold a knife and fork in their house.

The path flattened out and it turned. A stripe of Albert Falls dam stood grey and stoney on the edge of the horizon. She set her sight on the Beacons bench and pushed herself to a sprint for the last stretch, relishing the burn in her lungs and her legs and the blood pounding in her head that chased all other thoughts away.

Slowing to a walk for the last few paces her thoughts turned to Justice again. Should she trust him with her secret? She couldn't isolate the moment when it went back to being awkward with Justice. Awkward was too strong a word, just not quite as simple as it used to be. Somehow something had shifted again. So no, he definitely wasn't the one to bother with her dramas. She stepped up onto the stone bench and stretched her arms above her head like Dad used to get her to do. She breathed out as she lowered her arms to her sides. And again.

'There can't be a better place than this for a sun salute,' Dad used to say.

She turned to go back home and began to jog while Sarge broke from his trot into a canter beside her. It was probably best to leave the whole thing unspoken – a filthy secret that would surely fade with time? She forced her thoughts away from where they were heading and pushed herself faster as the incline rose towards home.

In a community like theirs being different could go one of two ways – either the differences made you the top dog, or you were the runt of the litter. She thought back to that first day when she was nervous to introduce Justice to the Barefoot Gang because she had her suspicions about which way it would go for him. But most of the Barefoots seemed happy enough to give him a chance, except Brad Hay who arrived the day after she had introduced Justice to all of them and said, 'It's a rule of the Barefoots that only family members of school staff can be members. Gogo is your family's maid, not a school staff member'.

'Seriously?' she said. 'Justice's grandad, Mkhulu, has been Hill House's bus driver for like a century. Is that good enough for you?'

Brad shut up. G and T had taken to wearing their shorts hooked up under their armpits and found old ties of Dad's to use as belts, just like Justice. Brad Hay returned the next day.

'He needs to be a family member of school teaching staff. Not just any staff.'

'Rubbish, Becca Vincent is the daughter of the estate manager,' she retorted. Brad had a crush on Becca. The rest of the Barefoots were already wearing their caps back to front, just like Justice. Brad made a final attempt on day three.

'He has to be a son, not a grandson of a staff member.'

'Oh shuddup Brad. Mike Macmillan is a member when he comes to stay with his grandparents in the holidays. Country membership has always been an option. Do you have a problem with Justice for any other reason that you're not saying?' said Emma Strickland and everybody clapped.

Brad knew better than to find another reason to keep Justice out, but she knew he was going to make things hard for Justice in other ways. Maybe that's why she took Justice under her wing? Looking back now it seemed she'd been on a lifelong quest to thwart bullies.

The Barefoot Gang headquarters was a disused round reservoir made of rusted corrugated iron. It was carved into the side of a hill behind the school estate workshop and submerged up to its belly into the ground from the access point side. Long before it became HQ it had been abandoned as a water storage facility. From the outside it appeared to be too shallow to be interesting, but it was also just deep enough that nobody could see inside it. In its original construction it must have been partly submerged, because from the inside there was enough space for the whole gang to stand upright without detection from the outside. It was big enough for them all to sit comfortably inside it during meetings. A complicated system of hidden twine ropes and ladders was their secret way in and out of HQ.

Nobody could remember who discovered it first, or when it became Barefoot property. All they knew was that the camouflaged access and the sturdy wooden crates that served as chairs and tables were all in place long before their time. But each generation of the Barefoots added its own touches to the mostly weatherproof furnishings. If a Barefoot's family left the school, their parting gift was often a tatty cushion or tired verandah furniture, or wobbly camper chairs, which always came into use. The walls were covered in posters that were recycled annually. Departing matric boys at the end of each year were seldom interested in taking their dormitory posters with them. So the rock bands that featured were always a season out of fashion, but none of the Barefoots cared. In truth, they didn't really know most of the music or the bands, but they pretended to because it was an unwritten rule in the Barefoots that what was cool amongst the Hill House boys was cool with the Barefoots.

There was a weekly meeting on a Friday evening at 5 pm in term time. During the holidays, when there was a lot to discuss and plan, there were daily meetings. The agenda was always the same: Post-match analysis, Fines, Upcoming Events, Matters Arising. They never elected a Chairman – it was a time-honoured tradition that the oldest kid was leader in their final year as a member, and the last year of eligible membership for anyone was the final year of primary school. In the second holiday after Justice joined the gang, Holly suggested to the gang that as the oldest, this made Justice Chairman for the holiday.

'Just leave it,' he whispered. 'Don't make a scene.'

'Justice doesn't qualify because he's a country member,' Brad Hay argued, predictably. Justice was more her friend than anyone else's and she was furious. Before she had time to

call Brad a racist, Emma Strickland said, ‘Let’s vote’, and Justice said, ‘I won’t stand for election’. So that was that.

The day came when Holly worked out that Justice was too ashamed to admit he couldn’t swim. She sensed he didn’t want to talk about it, especially not in front of the Barefoots. She wasn’t sure who else had worked it out, but she knew for sure that he couldn’t. He sat on the top step of the shallow end when they were all at the pool. He acted distracted and ignored the challenges. ‘Who can get to the other side without a breath? I bet you can’t lie touching the bottom of the deep end for thirty seconds!’ He usually couldn’t resist a dare or a bet involving a physical challenge. He banked on the fact that he was normally faster and more agile than any of them.

‘Let’s do summersaults off the high diving board, Justice?’ said Brad, who’d been practicing all week.

‘Next time. I’ve just remembered my Gogo said I need to help her with cleaning the Weaver’s braai this afternoon,’ he said and dashed off towards her house, pretending he didn’t hear the reply, ‘Chicken! Pakpaaak! Pakpaak!’

‘Why doesn’t he swim with us, Mum?’ T asked at lunch one day.

‘Ja. We beg him, but he always says he’s got stuff to do,’ chipped in G. The twins were amphibious and couldn’t remember a time when they couldn’t swim. They also couldn’t imagine that anyone would choose land over water, or even have to make the choice.

‘He probably doesn’t have much need for swimming,’ said Holly, and what she really meant passed them by. But they were hungry and distracted, so the questions disappeared. She looked at Mum who told her, in her unspoken way, that it was not for Holly to tell the boys that he couldn’t swim.

‘He may not want you all to know,’ Mum said to her later. ‘He’s considered different enough by some of the gang. Don’t make it even harder for him.’

So she planned her project for the rest of the holidays: Justice would learn to swim. She knew it would involve both of them pretending he could already swim. So she was going to have to teach him without him admitting he was learning. She knew there would be a silly game of pretense – he would act as if he thought that she thought he could swim.

The timing was perfect. The Barefoots had an outing to the Royal Show in Pietermaritzburg planned with a few of the mums. She made an excuse that she couldn’t go, and she made sure Mum arranged for G and T to go along with the rest of them. Justice arrived at her house in the morning as usual, ready for action, and waiting to hear what the gang’s plans were for the day. He looked disappointed when she said they were all going to

the Royal Show. They both knew that he'd sort of got used to being left behind on those days. It happened to him before when they went on Special Holiday Outings – candle dipping in Nottingham Road, or the picnic at Midmar Dam. She watched out of their rear window as he leaned against the backyard wall, and he showed no expression as he watched a car packed full of bouncing blonde heads disappear out the gate. Neither of them talked about it afterwards, and she hoped her eyes said, 'I'm sorry'. The Barefoot Gang all seemed to know, without it being spoken about, that some of their parents didn't see Justice as one of them. There was no disputing he was a card carrying member when they were on the school estate, but when it came to outings, he had to stay at her home with Gogo and occupy himself by helping Gogo with her work.

It was a stinking hot day. She told him they were going fishing at the dam on the west side of the school estate and it was just as well the Barefoots weren't around because there were only two lucky lures left, and they were best for bass fishing. She also reminded him that on a hot day like that, it was Sarge's best thing to go dam swimming.

They packed a rucksack with condensed milk and crunchies raided from the cupboard and apples from the fridge, a blanket, fishing rods and a pair of old tyre tubes that had gathered dust in the garage for years. They came in handy when the Umgeni River was high. En route to the dam, they went via the school workshop and asked Old Elias to pump up their tubes.

'What's the use of those?' Justice asked.

'Wait and see,' she said. He hated a mystery or a surprise, so he nagged her as they herded their tubes round Warrior's Way and down the hill to the dam. Her tube disobediently veered off into bushes on either side of the path and she became annoyed at the way Justice's held a firm line.

'My tube is weighted all wrong,' she grumbled.

'Want to swap?' he offered.

'No, it's fine, we're almost there,' she said. She ignored his smug expression as he rolled his tube with one hand and swung the rucksack over his shoulder, while she raced after the zigzagging tube that she had convinced herself was a dud.

When they got there they lay in the shade of a willow tree for a while and watched Sarge splash around the reeds and pounce on tadpoles in the muddy shallows. He never admitted defeat – time after time he'd come up for air, shake the water out of his ears, looked at her for approval, as if to say, 'Come and look what I've found', before returning to his task. When the Egyptian geese and red knobbed coots paddled alongside their brood of chicks, he couldn't resist the temptation to venture deeper. Instinct required him to wade after the

huddle of birds, compelled to chase and ambitiously ignore his other genetic limitations, lumbering through the water after squawking waterfowl in pointless circles.

'Why's he so stupid?' Justice asked. 'Can't he work out he'll never catch them?' and she bristled at her dog being called stupid, but said nothing because she knew he wasn't the smartest dog in the world. Besides, she didn't want to argue with Justice so early on in her project.

There was a little rowing boat that lay upside down under a tree with the oars hidden in its belly. It was one of many communal assets of the school families. They all knew the rules: play with it as much as you like, just return it more or less as you found it. So it was always there, gathering spiders, losing paint, gaining a few small dents, but still able to do its job. They turned it over and dragged it into the reeds. They started by standing in the mud next to Sarge.

'Look at that strange kicking style of those froglets. I suppose they do it like that so their legs move around that funny little tail that they'll soon lose,' she said. 'I think splashing with both legs straight is much easier than that, don't you?'

'Ja …' he said tentatively.

'I think it's faster too,' she added. He bent low to inspect the metamorphosing tadpole-frogs' breaststroke kick.

'I know,' she said, 'let's experiment. You ride in the boat and I'll swim behind it. I'll hang on with my arms and kick with my legs and you see which kicking style moves the boat faster.'

So they launched the boat. He wasn't scared of squelching through the mud, as long as he could stand. Then, when they were at knee depth, he hopped in and she hung on from behind. She made exaggerated kicking gestures with her legs.

'This way, this way, or this way?' she asked, making him notice the difference between three different kicks. First she demonstrated a stretched-leg fast kick, then a sloppier splashy version, and lastly a breaststroke kick. They did it a few times. 'My science teacher says you always need to repeat an experiment a few times to check it's scientifically correct.' She made Justice count, 'One crocodile, two crocodile …' as they lapped the dam and reached landmarks on the shore, and he watched her legs and made mental notes of which kick worked best for their experiment.

'I suppose you can't see properly if I'm switching leg strokes because my legs are under the water?" she said. 'What if I stick the tyre-tube under my tummy so my legs float a bit higher? Then you can check I don't make any mistakes and switch styles.' So they decided

the tyre was a good addition, both agreeing that in the interests of good science her leg actions must be perfectly clear. Justice didn't talk. He watched each move she made in the water.

'Now it's your turn,' she bossed. 'It's not scientific to conclude which is strongest by only using one swimmer.' He hesitated. 'Hang onto the boat tight,' she ordered. She ignored her sense that he knew she knew his secret. 'Now do it exactly the same way as me,' she said as she dragged the boat back to the muddy bank so that they were placed safely in the shallows. 'We'll start with the tyre-tube under your tummy,' she instructed and he seemed persuaded. They slowly ventured back towards the middle of the dam.

They spent another hour or two with him clinging onto the back of the boat and kicking around after it with the tyre-tube under him to keep afloat.

'Straighter legs and bigger splash,' she shouted over the noise of his frantic splashing.

'I'm trying, I'm trying,' he said, but he wasn't cross. He grinned with scrunched eyes and a head held high out the water to avoid the splash.

Over that holiday he soon abandoned the tube and they both abandoned their pretence of a science experiment. She lazed on the boat in the sun yelling occasional instructions as she was powered around and around the dam like a fairytale princess and him her servant frog. Sarge sat patiently on the bank watching them in between terrorising tadpoles and half-heartedly stalking birds.

They returned to the dam whenever they could that holiday. Sometimes the other Barefoots tagged along, but they usually drifted off in pursuit of other fun after a while. He was a fast learner. They spent their afternoons rolling and ducking and bobbing and drifting like otters between the reeds. He drifted on his back with his arms outstretched and grinned at the sun overhead. They traipsed home in the evening, her shoulders and nose aching with sunburn.

'You're a tomato,' he said.

'Well you don't look any different, really. Maybe a bit blacker. Does sunburn feel the same for you as it does for me?'

'Yes,' he answered, 'I think so.' And she felt silly for asking.

There wasn't a specific day when she changed her mind and felt she couldn't ask him silly questions. As she ran, she wished she could pinpoint an incident, a thing that happened – a squabble or even a blazing row. But she trawled through her memories and knew it wasn't that simple. If it had been she could have said sorry or demanded his apology. Instead their

friendship became like that old boat on the dam. When they were thirteen years old it cruised along the top of the water and they paddled in perfect time – Holly at the front, the navigator and captain, always at left oar, Justice behind her, the engine room, paddling right oar. By the time they turned fifteen they didn't notice that the timing of their paddling was slightly off. Or if they did, they pretended they didn't, because they didn't really know how to fix it or discuss it. So they did nothing about paddling faster or slower, or about bailing water. Silence began to swirl around the truth and smother what they both avoided talking about. They stopped repairing the little leaks. By the time she turned sixteen they both seemed to accept that the boat was waterlogged and that they were also tired of circling round and round the same dam. So they allowed it to sink.

As she picked up the pace for her final home stretch her pulse throbbed with memories of awkwardness and misunderstandings. She tried to remember the easiness of a funny best friendship that just happened to be between a boy and girl. She tried to ignore the taint of her seventeen-year-old guilt on those childish memories and she almost persuaded herself to confide in Justice for a moment. But as she slowed to a walk down her driveway she knew that back then heavy words like "colonist" and "patronising" were a foreign language to her. In those days she knew that they both thought about brown as another colour that could as easily have been hers or his favourite of the week, like yellow was sometimes. Or blue or pink.

CHAPTER 4

JUSTICE

In search of simpler days

'Shesha!' – hurry, he called and turned to catch up. He jogged to catch his friends and had almost caught up when Buhle, in his best English, goaded him.

'Who's your girlfriend Justice?'

'Just let it go,' he said with a forced laugh. He cautioned himself not to get defensive. Instead he jostled and shoved his friend as they strode up the dirt road towards the security gate that separated the Teapots Valley from the school campus.

'Coco-coco-coconuuuut,' chimed Josiah.

'Says the guy who spends too much money on hair straightener and skin lightener,' Justice rejoined.

'Ha, yes, look at you nowadays, Buhle! Maybe Justice can help you find a white squeeza?' Mpho added.

He was relieved the focus had shifted. He walked in silence as the jibes were tossed. He laughed when they laughed and chipped in with empty chirps as he half-listened. But his mind was on Holly and her poor effort at hiding her obvious distress.

'Ah, guys, I forgot my lunch box! So stupid. And I'm already hungry,' he said hoping they would buy his excuse. 'You go on. I'm going to run back. I'll try to catch you. Please make some excuse for me if I'm late for school.' He turned and trotted back down the hill, ignoring the calls that followed him.

'What did you really forget Justice? Your girlfriend?'

'Quickly go fetch her before someone else does!'

He knew he needed to check on Holly. As he jogged in the direction he guessed she had gone, he thought back on a school holiday when Gogo and Mkhulu's khaya clung to the muddy side of the hill. He went to bed each night half expecting that one more drop of rain would wash them into the Umgeni. The mist was a ghost that rolled over the school campus and across empty rugby fields each evening and down towards them in the Teapots Valley. Sometimes it shamelessly swayed in the back door like an uninvited guest.

Gogo took him with her to work at the Weaver's house every day.

'Ngicela usizo lwakho ngokulungisa indlu. Kufanele kubukeke kahle ngo Khisimusi' – I need your help in preparing the house. It must look smart for Christmas, she warned. He knew that Gogo's excuse for taking him there to help was a pretense that would only last a

few days. He was hoping he would soon be gathered up into the busyness of the Weaver family like previous holidays. He was too old to be a member of the Barefoots, but he worked out that the gang would ignore this as long as he came and went with the Weaver children and didn't annoy anyone. He had nothing better to do and Gogo didn't want him hanging around at home and bothering Mkhulu all day while she was at work.

'Bekufanele aphumule, ubeli dinga leliholidi' – he needs to rest, he deserves this holiday, she said. Mkhulu had no school driving duties in December, so he enjoyed snoozing and reading his newspaper and didn't need Justice interrupting his peace and quiet.

For the first few days he did his fair share of work. He washed Mrs Weaver's car in its garage, but by the next day it stood sulking, covered in mud again. He chopped firewood for the misty evenings and Holly seemed sulkier than the car.

'We must be the only people in South Africa who spend our Christmas in a climate where we need to burn fires every night,' she complained. G and T chattered and stacked as he chopped, and the three of them made plans for the sunny days that they were confident would soon come.

Each holiday was the same, so he knew the pattern. He helped Gogo for the first few days, in between a bit of ball kicking in the driveway with Holly and the twins, until their friendship found its way back to solid ground, and then his work hours shrank and his play hours grew. By the second week he was a member at the Weaver family table for meals again. Of course he didn't dare neglect his duties – he made sure he was the first to help Gogo clear the table and he lined up as assistant dishwasher until she dismissed him.

Outside the rain poured and poured.

'Let's build a fort, Justice,' said G.

'The cushions can be the walls and the tablecloth will be the roof,' said T.

So they turned the lounge into a house inside a house where they played card games and Monopoly. Boredom set in as the rain kept on and they wrestled on the carpet in the lounge and tossed cushions at each other, and the twins jumped on him, and then a pottery bowl slipped off a table and crashed to the floor. As he was picking up the pieces, Mrs Weaver appeared in the doorway.

'Boys, enough!' she shouted.

Holly seemed different that holiday, and he wished he could find a moment to talk to her alone. She participated in a distracted way and seemed to drift off before the end of the games.

‘Look at our big tombi, off to high school soon,’ said Gogo as she patted and fussed around her, and Holly seemed to humour her with a frozen smile. He wanted to ask how she felt about going off to high school and if she was scared of being at St Agnes, such a fancy school, but she didn’t seem interested in chatting to him. He blamed the grey weather on their slightly frozen friendship and kept hoping for the sunshine that he believed would thaw their awkwardness.

With three days to go until Christmas, they were pushed out of the house by Mrs Weaver.

‘Make the boys run and get rid of some cabin fever, Holly. I need some privacy to wrap presents and I’m not sure I can stand the chaos for another second.’ Holly rolled her eyes and slouched out of the room.

‘Why me?’ she moaned.

‘Why not you?’ said Mrs Weaver, and Justice felt suddenly like an irritating third little brother. Holly disappeared down the passage and came back wearing an old T-shirt and shorts and threw a pair of men’s shorts and T-shirt to him.

‘There, put those on,’ she said. He ran to the laundry to change. When he went back into the house the boys were similarly dressed in old clothes. Mrs Weaver was busy writing at her desk, and looked up at them on their way out.

‘Why not cover yourselves in dustbin bags to stay …’ She froze as her eyes locked on his outfit for a moment. She seemed to forget her thoughts and turned her back to them. He thought he picked up a crack in her voice as she hesitated, then continued.

‘Don’t stay out until you’re frozen, kids. I just need half an hour of peace.’ He silently followed the others out the back door. He guessed, from Mrs Weaver’s strange reaction to what he was wearing, that he could only be wearing a dead man’s clothes.

As they stomped barefoot through puddles towards their destination, Holly muttered each step of the way.

‘I can tell we’re heading for the Importance of Boredom speech,’ she grouched.

‘Maybe we’ll also get the So Much To Be Grateful For lecture,’ T chipped in. Sarge scrambled through bushes howling as his nose dragged him off in a different direction to theirs.

‘Sarge, come on,’ Holly yelled sternly. Justice followed the others silently, making sure his footprints landed in the puddle shadows of where hers had been. A thought fluttered through him that he must have looked like the more obedient of her two pets.

T ran ahead and, as they rounded the corner, he slipped down the bank on his stomach between the two rugby fields and skidded over the top of the thin puddle of water on the

bottom field. They all sprinted to join him and queued up for a turn. They called it duck-diving. He didn't know why, because the ducks he had watched dived under the surface. He ran up to the edge of the bank and threw himself down it and slid to the bottom. The idea was to skim along the top. Down the bank they flew and round and up they ran to do it all over again. Their legs and stomachs were rubbed raw and their tatty clothes mud-caked. Once he crashed into Holly at the bottom of the hill.

'Give me time to clear out the way before you dive. You're smothering me,' she snarled, and her words made a smoky haze. Her cheeks were pink and her hair hung in wet ropes that looked like strands of red licorice. He wanted to wipe them off her pale face and say something brilliant to do with roses about her rosy cheeks. But the words wouldn't take shape.

On their walk back in soggy brown T-shirts and heavy shorts, he shook wet branches over her head and jumped in puddles to splash her, and made pathetic jokes that he didn't now remember. She'd walked home in a brooding silence that he couldn't find his way through. G and T had run ahead, shivering.

'Thank you for lending me your Dad's clothes,' he said to her. She waved his thanks away. But he pressed ahead with what he wanted to say, knowing the risks. 'I think it is harder for you than for me. I never met mine, so I don't know what it's like to miss him. I don't have memories of a dad that I need to try and forget. Is Christmas hardest for you?'

She didn't answer, but she stopped for a moment and looked at him through wet eyes in her driveway before shrugging and pushing her way through the kitchen door.

Gogo and Justice walked home after work that evening under another heavy grey sky, but the rain had stopped.

'I think tomorrow we'll have sunshine,' he said, practicing his English on her.

'Wena, ungasifunda isingisi kuMkhulu, kodwa mina nawe siyohlezi sikhulumisana ngesiZulu, uKuze wazi ukuthi kumele uziqenye ngolimi lwakini' – You can learn English from Mkhulu, but you and I will always speak to one another in Zulu. So that you know you should be proud of your mother tongue. She clucked and shook her head as she walked and he felt as if the bad weather was infecting everyone's mood. That night, as he was heading off to sleep, Gogo told him that Mrs Weaver had come to her just before chayile time to say, 'Gogo, our house is quite small to have all these children lying around all day and waiting for the rain to stop. We have so much to do before Christmas. I think Justice needs to spend some time at home with his grandfather. It's a time for families to be together, Gogo'.

Time was running out. Justice needed to get to school and he was about to give up on what now seemed like a useless search for Holly. There were too many paths through the forest, and he realised it would have been so easy for them to pass each other on paths just a few metres apart because the forest was so thick. He turned to jog back up the hill when he heard the squeak of a wheel. Then again and again. Squeak-silent-squeak-silent-squeak. Mr Macdonald – the Headmaster of Hill House – rode up alongside him.

'Good morning,' he cheered. 'Who do we have here?'

'Good morning, Sir, Mr Mac. It's Justice. Mkhulu Makathini's grandson. I don't know if you remember me …'

'Justice! What a marvellous surprise. Of course I do. Sorry, didn't recognise you in your school uniform. I've seen you from a distance on campus of course – in your guard's uniform. But don't you worry, I've been keeping track of your progress.'

'Thank you, Sir.'

'No thanks needed. Just keep up the good work. My sources tell me you're doing a fine job. Not easy juggling your school work and then your part-time guarding …'

'Thank you Sir, I am grateful for the job,' he said, and a wave of guilt swept through him as he thought of his guarding efforts from the previous night.

'Hardly a job, Justice, just a bit of part-time stuff to help you along the way. I really believe you'll get yourself off to law school, Justice. Keep those eyes fixed on that, will you?'

'Yes Sir. Thank you Sir, Mr Mac.'

'You'll do it, you really will. I've got that feeling about you …'

'I hope so, Mr Mac.'

'C'mon, Justice. I'll keep you company part of the way. We've both got schools to go to,' and he insisted on riding alongside Justice almost all the way back. Justice walked at his side and was relieved to have Mr Mac's questions and conversation to push his conscience aside as he hurried up the hill.

'I have to leave you now Justice, sorry, but I am so late. I wish I could spend more time … I saw your old friend Holly. On a run this morning … still runs like the wind, that girl.' And then he pulled away from Justice up the hill. 'Hope we'll bump into each other again soon. Good to see you,' he called over his shoulder and he waved as he disappeared over the rise.

The cicadas began to sizzle and he thought of turning again to find Holly. Mr Mac's comment meant she must be somewhere behind him, probably not far away. But he weighed up his schoolwork and Mr Mac's words of encouragement and advice on his future, and was

persuaded to let the sun chase him towards the McKenzie gates. He hoped he would get there in time to hitch a lift towards the village and then a quick taxi on to school. As he broke into a jog again he worried over his earlier conversation with Holly, and then began again to worry about her running alone.

He convinced himself that Holly had brushed aside his friendship enough over the years and it was probably only in his imagination and wishful thinking that he mattered, even as a friend, to her. He felt stupid for feeling hurt and protective. He reminded himself of how often he had misread Holly, even in their simpler, younger days, as his memory returned to the two days leading up to Christmas when he hoped he would be recalled.

The sun had shone and the sky had been still and hot, and steam rose off the ground as it was baked dry, but the summons never came. He hung around Mkhulu, who sat on an upside down cold-drink crate in the sun and read *The Natal Mercury*. He clicked his teeth and spat and muttered, 'Osopolitiki, sies' – politicians, sis – and then they spent the afternoon of Christmas eve under the bonnet of his blue Datsun skorokoro. Mkhulu fiddled with wires, preparing it for their Christmas day ride to church. He was given the job of starting the car and pumping the accelerator. It stuttered, then roared, and Mkhulu shouted instructions around the side of the bonnet that he couldn't hear.

Gogo returned from work on Christmas Eve and said nothing. When he looked at her hopefully that evening she took his hand.

'Angikwazanga ukubuza' – I couldn't ask. So he and Mkhulu spent Christmas day together because Gogo worked. The double pay was too much of an incentive to turn down and, besides, it meant they could celebrate with their own roast chicken that night.

He recalled how Mkhulu woke him at sunrise turned out in his driving hat and pressed suit. Justice jumped into the clean clothes that Gogo had laid out for him at the end of his bed. By the time he got to the bakkie, Gogo was perched on the passenger seat looking smart in her best uniform. Justice sat in the back and sucked on the apple that Gogo had cut into neat slices, until they got up to the hill and onto the school estate. They drove up to the Weaver's house and Gogo climbed out, while he climbed out the back to join Mkhulu in the front seat. He lagged a little in the driveway and coughed loudly and slammed the back canopy door hoping someone would look outside and see him. Maybe the excitement of Christmas was the reason he had been forgotten? But the house was still and, as they drove off to church, he watched Gogo let herself into the dark silence and bring it to light.

That evening when Gogo returned from work the three of them enjoyed their own Christmas dinner and they discussed soccer as they ate. Mkhulu's passion for soccer, the English League, and Arsenal in particular, was infectious and Justice was becoming as big a fan. Mkhulu talked about a disastrous Christmas patch for Arsenal when a player called Tony Adams was arrested for drunk driving. Mkhulu explained how he couldn't think about anything else that Christmas.

'Hayibo, I should have known, great teams cannot be taken down by one man. No matter how great he is,' he said as he picked at his drumstick. Gogo was tired, but in good spirits, and she laughed.

'Hai, nina nobabili nibonakala engathi nithanda leliqembu lenu, iAresenal ngaphezu kukaJesu kuloKhisimusi' – you both seem to love Arsenal more than Jesus this Christmas – and she served second helpings onto their plates. Justice remembered replying that it wasn't Jesus' fault he couldn't play soccer like Arsenal footballers. Mkhulu and Gogo laughed with wide mouths that showed their teeth and their Christmas food.

'Sengizimisele ukubuyela emsebenzini' – I am ready to go back to work, Mkhulu said as they enjoyed their feast.

'Lokhu uhlezi ukusho makuwu Khisimusi' – you always say that when it's Christmas, Gogo replied, laughing. Mkhulu smiled for the rest of the night as he told them of the Hill House boys' pranks on his bus and Justice remembered once saying he would love to be a teacher. He went to bed feeling full.

On Boxing Day the sun shone again and the village seemed to rise early and hum with noise. A lot of the village staff had worked on Christmas day, so Boxing Day was always like Christmas for many households in Teapots. Mkhulu and Gogo had a few visitors who strolled into the yard throughout the morning, some with good wishes and stories of their Christmas day, others describing their plans of celebrations for the day ahead. The children were all impatient to play in the sunshine and the adults all called cheerful greetings to their neighbours as they strolled the lanes between the houses. The adults discussed how they hoped the sun would last long enough to dry out their homes. A little girl who lived in the house closest to the gate, Mbali, ran up to Justice, jumping up and down.

'Kukhona izingane zabelungu ezintathu ezithi zizobona wena' – there are three white children saying they're here to see you. He wanted to drop everything and run, but Gogo and Mkhulu were watching him.

'Bamemele phakathi' – invite them in, said Mkhulu.

‘Maybe,’ he replied and tried to look casual as he strolled to the gate at the edge of the village.

As they came into sight he heard T yell.

‘Happy Christmas, Justice!’

‘What did Father Christmas bring you? I got a potato gun and a bike,’ G shouted.

‘And a catty!’ chipped in T, and Holly shushed them.

‘Not so loud boys, people may be resting.’ Maybe the sun had thawed her? Sarge even gave him what he interpreted as a Merry Christmas bark. They all stood there in traditional Barefoots uniform – T-shirts, boxer shorts, slip-slops and towels slung around their necks. G and T each held inflated black tractor tyre-tubes around their waists, and he teased them.

‘Your bodies are the shape of the district cane farmers.’ Holly heaved a box covered in Christmas wrapping onto the top of the gate.

‘This is from our family to yours. Happy Christmas,’ she said.

‘Thank you. Come and see Gogo and Mkhulu to give it to them yourself,’ he said and fiddled with the gate’s padlock to let them in. While he didn’t think it then, looking back Justice realised that was the only time he could recall the gate being used to keep people out. Its traditional use seemed to be to keep his people in – off the nature reserve, away from the Umgeni and outside the main school campus. He carried the box for Holly as he led them down the lane. A few children gathered and danced around them as they walked. His strides grew more confident and he felt like an important host as they got closer to home and their group of little fans grew. The bravest few touched the three children’s clothes, and Mbali slipped her hand into Holly’s, who stopped for a moment, bent down and hoisted the little girl onto her back. As she piggy-backed her along, Mbali patted and twisted her fingers through Holly’s red hair and Holly winced and squeaked and smiled all at once. By the time they walked into the yard he had forgotten his concerns about what the Weavers would think of the small khaya and he was not surprised to find Mkhulu waiting in the doorway like a self-appointed village chief. Mkhulu positioned himself with his hands on his hips and took up the whole doorframe as if to form a barrier – his polite way of keeping the curious guests outside. Gogo soon emerged with a tray full of tea mugs and Marie biscuits, and they all sat in a circle in the yard on upturned paint tins and bottle crates.

‘Gogo, here is your Christmas present,’ said Holly, presenting the box. As Gogo opened it, T chattered.

‘The reindeer ate the carrots you peeled!’

‘We even heard their hooves on the roof!’ said G, and Holly winked at Justice. Inside the present box was a Bakers Christmas Variety Pack with pictures of biscuits he knew, and some he had never heard of, tins of condensed milk, jam and coffee, and boxes of tea and chocolates and packets of Simba chips and peanuts. A supply of groceries. Gogo looked as surprised and thrilled as she did when she had unwrapped similar contents the previous year and she hugged and thanked them with the same gratitude.

‘Gogo, can Justice come swimming in the Umgeni with us?’ asked T.

‘Okay, but not for long. He is leaving tomorrow. We must get him ready for a trip with Mkhulu to his other family,’ she said.

The village children danced alongside them all the way back to the gate, and he was grateful for Sarge who had been left tied there. As the children ran towards him, Sarge threw himself up against it, barking and howling. They screamed and huddled together, and stepped back from the gate. He was saved having to explain why he was invited to go down to the river, and thanks to Sarge’s hostility he didn’t even have to bribe them with sweets to stay inside the compound.

They spent the afternoon bouncing down the swollen Umgeni on the tubes, dragging themselves to the side by gripping reeds, and out onto the banks at the picnic site, then running back to an entry point upstream where there was a wide, slow-flowing part. Holly got bored sooner than the rest of them, and he made an excuse to join her on the bank. The twins were happy to keep going. Up they ran and down they floated, then back they went to repeat the fun. She sat cross-legged on her towel at his side, and she busied herself with pulling at pieces of grass, uprooting them from the soil.

‘I wish you could have joined us for Christmas lunch.’

‘Don’t worry, I had fun,’ he said.

‘I didn’t. Nana, Dad’s mum, had lunch with us, and she and Mum aren’t really friends. Mum had a lot to say about Nana giving me make-up for Christmas and about her spoiling the boys with bikes. It’s like they compete over everything.’

‘I’m sure it wasn’t so bad?’ he soothed, knowing Holly liked to dramatise things. She glared at him.

‘Oh no? By the time we were eating our Christmas pudding, Nana was drinking toasts to Dad,’ she said.

‘Maybe it’s good to remember him?’ he offered.

‘Oh wait, it didn’t stop there. They had this big fat argument where Nana started saying he’d have been right there with them to drink his own champagne and celebrate his own

Christmas with his family if he had just agreed to chemotherapy.' Her voice sounded dry and croaky. She paused, looked away for a moment and took a few deep breaths. He wished she would just cry rather than be tough, but her blue eyes fixed on his and she continued.

'Sure, they had both had quite a bit of champagne, but I don't think they were drunk. I wish they had been, then they could have blamed it on that, and it would be easier to fix. Mum flew back at Nana that this had been a personal choice that shouldn't be questioned …'

He felt that Holly was expecting him to say something, but he didn't have any comfort to give. Their knees were touching, and his skin fizzed where they connected. He wanted to reach across to take hold of her hand. Her nails had mud underneath them from the grass pulling. She turned to him and her mouth was screwed into a tight knot as she mimicked her grandmother's performance for his benefit.

'Then Nana started ranting, "Personal choice? Personal choice? You can't even spell those words!"'

She became silent and looked down, and he saw three tears drip off the end of her nose into the grass that she went back to ripping. Faster and faster she yanked. He was trying to form a reply as he stared at the bubbling river surface. Then he saw him – Sarge's snout surfaced briefly from a tangle of reeds near the opposite bank, then disappeared. He saw the dog's two front paws scratching, clawing for something solid as he surfaced, then disappeared, surfaced then disappeared. He couldn't recall the rest in detail, but he knew from what they told him afterwards that he dived in, swam across and pulled Sarge's trapped back legs free. They all knew that the Umgeni in flood hid dangerous logs and traps in its undercurrents, but they were reckless children on Boxing Day, especially when the sun was out.

'We would never have seen him again,' said G.

'Thanks,' sobbed T, 'you saved our favourite pet.' He was keen to joke and remind them that Sarge had tough competition – their other pet was a goldfish, Sheriff – but he kept quiet instead. Holly sat with her panting dog across her lap, drying him off and kissing him and whispering into the top of his head. She wiped him down with her towel and her tears dropped onto his soggy coat. As with all children's adventures, by the time they parted ways at Teapots gate and trudged up the hill towards their home, several versions were already changing and growing. Sarge was heaving himself alongside them, but his tail still wagged his body as he disappeared with them around the bend at the end of the road.

He never did get to say, 'Good luck in your new school', or offer any sympathy about her family's unhappiness, or to say how great he thought she'd be at high school. He persuaded

himself she didn't need any of this from him. Maybe it was a good thing they didn't have a chance to talk again after that. After he packed he stayed awake until late that night finishing off a project he had started at the beginning of the holidays in the rain. He had made a little clay family from the mud in the lane outside their khaya. If he remembered right, it was probably a project that began out of boredom. There was a Mrs Weaver and a Holly and a Graham and a Thomas and a Sarge. He decided to add a Mr Weaver that night, although he didn't know what he looked like, except from a few photos he'd seen around the Weaver house. But he imagined he was big. Mind you, Justice was no sculptor, so he was probably as like the real person as any of the other mud figures. And then he made a Justice too, just for fun.

He left the two new figures to dry overnight and then he folded Mr Weaver into newspaper to join the rest of his family and he wrapped them in the Christmas paper that had come off their present to him and Gogo and Mkhulu. His clay Justice stayed behind on the windowsill. It didn't feel as if he quite belonged with the Weaver family figurines. Before he left with Mkhulu the next morning to visit Mkhulu's family, he gave the parcel to Gogo and asked her to give it to Holly as a late Christmas present.

CHAPTER 5

GOGO

A smile that worries mothers

‘We hear you’ve become a rugby fan lately?’ said T. She was in the scullery. He whispered it more than said it, but she heard it anyway. She walked into the kitchen. Holly said nothing and kept buttering her toast. G pretended to have a fitting cough.

‘Hoa … Hoa … Whore.’

Holly turned around. She gripped the knife in her fist and shook it at him. A lump of peanut butter dropped off the knife and onto the clean floor. She glared at him in silence for a while, but said nothing, then turned her back on him and went back to her toast. Gogo decided against telling Holly to clean up the mess on the floor. Easier to do it herself later when Holly was in that sort of mood.

She had resolved not to interfere in these fights between the Weaver children. Although Nkosasane had always said to her she must discipline them as she pleased, it didn’t feel right to interfere at the moment. She wasn’t sure she understood what they were talking about, although she could tell from the boys’ tone that they were teasing Holly. Besides, they were all getting big now and it was time they fought their own battles. She gave a passing thought to the responsibilities Justice was carrying around with him when he was the same age as the twins – helping her at her work during his holidays, hitch-hiking to school, walking kilometres every day. She removed herself to the scullery again. She heard the bickering continue from the kitchen and drift down the passage, angry sounds in low whispers that were not meant to be heard by adults.

There had been quite a lot of closed doors, hushed conversations, door slamming and brittle silences in the house in the last week or two. Something had changed quite suddenly. The house had the same heaviness as when Mr Weaver died many years ago. She had hoped she would never work in a place of such sadness again.

Only a month ago Holly had spent most of her free time staring at her cell phone and smiling. It worried her, all that nonsense time on the phone, but it was also lovely to have Holly as a happy, helpful presence around the house. When she put her phone aside, she teased her brothers and helped them with their homework and joined in their games. She was intrigued by their chatter about Hill House. It was in stark contrast to her new quiet insular ways.

Mind you, Holly had always been unpredictable. She thought back to the earlier days when Justice used to spend his holidays with her at the Weaver home and how each day he couldn't guess which Holly he was going to find. Funny and energetic one day, a misery the next. Had she done Justice any favours expecting him to meekly put up with those moods? Or Holly for that matter? She recalled the little clay statuettes that Justice had made of the Weaver family and sent to Holly as a Christmas present, and how angry she felt that Holly never said thanks and left them gathering dust in a drawer somewhere. Meanwhile she taught Justice the importance of writing a thank you note to Nkosasane for the staff Christmas hamper from Spar. Had she helped or hindered Justice, or Holly, in their passage through this complicated world by passively allowing him to think that this unwritten set of different rules was in order?

In that cheerful, phone-staring phase of a few weeks ago, Holly had the kind of smile that worries mothers – a smile that girls use only for certain boys. Her thumbs tapped away at the screen as she lay around. Once or twice Gogo couldn't help herself. She scolded her.

'Holly, off that couch now. I can't clean properly while you lie there typing love letters.'

'C'mon Gogs, they're not love letters,' Holly replied in a distracted way without looking up from her phone. Then in the holidays she kept asking the twins all about the Hill House news and what gossip they had heard. What a change from her 'Hill House, Hill House' chant that she threw at the boys every time they spoke of the place a few months ago. Then she'd whine, 'Can we talk about something else for once please? You're not even Hill House boys yet. What will it be like when you start school there next year? Pace yourselves'.

Then there was that day when a Hill House boy came knocking on the door. Nobody else was home, just Holly, and her. She was busy with her ironing in the laundry when the doorbell rang. By the time she got to the entrance hall Holly was already at the door and they were grinning at each other. Holly invited him in and they sat on the couch together for a while and looked at each other's phones and giggled and whispered.

She took herself into the kitchen, but made sure that she drifted past the living room and down the passage to clean not long after he arrived. Whispering was a problem for her and she knew they would struggle to hear each other over the noise of the vacuum cleaner, even if they shouted, and that suited her fine. She was just waiting for Holly to close the living room door and she would have said something, but Holly obviously saw her stormy look and thought better of it. There was no harm in letting them know she was keeping an eye.

Yes, she knew that look. She knew what that kind of laugh meant. A laugh that tinkled like the wind chimes on the verandah in an oncoming storm. She could not forget it. It was

the look and sound her only child, Thandeka, had so long ago. And she knew that no good came from this sort of thing. She promised herself to say something to Holly when the moment presented itself. She knew Nkosasane would not have seen the change in Holly, or known about the visitor. Her boss worked hard and was at school most of the time when she was at work. So they often communicated by notes for weeks. She thought about speaking to Nkosasane, but it was a difficult conversation to put into words, and even harder to write in a note. Hard to say things that she had learnt from her own life and explain how it could happen in this home too. She began to doubt herself, and decided that there was probably nothing to worry about. And so the weeks passed.

But now, over the last week, there seemed to be a different reason to worry. Holly was quiet and tired all the time. The smiles were gone. Mostly she was gone to school before Gogo started work in the mornings and when she was dropped at home by the lift scheme at the top of the driveway in the afternoons she dragged her feet and looked at the ground as she came in. She went straight up to her room without saying hello, or she came into the kitchen and stood staring into the fridge, or made toast in silence, only for herself.

She unloaded the dishwasher and sorted the cutlery into the drawer. Holly's happiness before the holiday must be linked to her sadness now. But nobody was talking about it. That annoyed her about the Weaver family, or maybe it was a generally annoying thing between mlungus and domestic workers? She was expected to treat this family like her own. Those were Nkosasane's exact words: 'You are like a second mother to my children'. Yet she wasn't allowed to know their secrets, and she was expected to pretend everything was always fine and the same. She remembered wondering for months what was going on with this family the last time there was a sadness here. She only heard that Mr Weaver was dying from Aggie, the housekeeper next door, once it was almost over. She wasn't sure if knowing would have helped her to do her job any better, but maybe ... And what was the harm in telling her? The silence and the secrets were confusing.

She took an onion out the veggie drawer and the mince out of the fridge and set them on the counter next to the stove. The twins rushed into the kitchen in their swimming costumes with towels wrapped around their necks.

'What's for supper Gogs?' asked T.

'Spag Bol, my boy. Where are you off to, and how long will you be?'

'Just a quick swim with some of the Barefoots, Gogo. Won't be long,' added G.

'Have you finished your homework? You know your mum will shout at me if I let you go before that.'

‘All done, Gogs,’ shouted T over his shoulder as he made for the door.

‘Promise?’

‘Promise,’ said T and G together as they turned to face her and both licked their fingers and crossed their hearts – T with his right hand and G with his left.

‘Please make lots Gogo, I’m starving!’ said G, and he came over and hugged her tight. He was getting strong that one. Puberty was on its way now. Not yet for T, but G seemed to be growing in his sleep each night at the moment. Mind you, she still had a feeling T would grow to be bigger than G in the end, once the growing started. No harm in being a late developer. Justice was such a late bloomer and it had made him resilient. The teasing he received taught him to take himself less seriously. She smiled at the thought of those skinny long legs and teeth too big for his face for all those years.

‘Please, not too late my boys, I want you back before I go,’ she called as they rushed up the driveway and out of sight and Sarge trotted after them.

The lump of peanut butter on the floor caught her eye – best to wipe that up before she forgot. This forgetfulness was becoming a problem. Like the aching joints, she thought, as she bent to wipe the floor with a cloth. Maybe retirement would be possible soon – when Justice qualified and became a lawyer.

Justice was born not long after Thandeka began to laugh that same tinkling laugh, and gaze with that same look of Holly’s. Why didn’t she chase that young boy away – the one who came wandering over to their khaya with his charming smile and warm voice and witty comments, and his pretense of needing clever Thandeka’s help with school work. And of course he brought her little gifts each time – a soap that smelled of lavender, a flower from the field around the corner. But gifts weren’t the only thing he gave her. Then his visits became scarce, and it wasn’t long until he disappeared altogether.

She still couldn’t forgive herself for having done nothing more than glare at the two young lovers in silence from her kitchen window in the evenings as she prepared supper. Of course she didn’t know for sure that they were lovers, but why had she not interfered? If only she had spoken, perhaps Thandeka would have listened. But then, of course, Justice was the blessing that came from her silence.

She set a pan on the stove and turned on a gas plate and began to melt a knob of butter. She chopped the onion into little squares. She felt annoyed that she had pushed away thoughts like this eighteen years ago, but now they were back with her again. She had never wished Justice away, and she thanked God every night for her grandson. As she slipped the onions into the bubbling butter, she wondered what God’s plan was for her when he

exchanged Justice for Thandeka. She scolded herself under her breath for her foolishness at questioning God's will, and wiped her sweating forehead against her sleeve. She wasn't sure how much of her watering eyes to put down to onion chopping. The butter began to sizzle and the onions smelled good as they browned and the eye watering subsided.

She would leave a note for Nkosasane before she left that evening to say they should talk. She would find a way to explain that she had seen that look – the happy and the sad one – before. If she could explain both looks, maybe she could prevent Holly from Thandeka's pain. She hoped she wasn't too late.

She took her laundry basket to the line and unclipped the pegs. She dropped the crisp washing into the basket and heaved it inside. Too many moments had passed between her and this family when she couldn't understand what had gone wrong. She remembered trying to explain this thing to Justice, too, when he was a little boy.

'I think I did something wrong today,' he'd confide in her. 'Holly seemed angry for no reason,' he'd say to her under a worried frown, more than once.

'Abelungu, nje," – that's just white people, she said, because she couldn't find another way to explain what she herself didn't understand.

CHAPTER 6

HOLLY

Listen to what the grown-ups say

She heard a car crunch down the driveway. It was late for visitors and late for her to be awake. She'd been lying in bed and worrying. Worrying about who to talk to, what to say, how to explain. She couldn't make sense of it herself, so how could she explain it to anyone else? She felt as if she would never sleep a whole night through again.

She heard Mum open the front door and she recognised Nana's deep voice, but she couldn't make out her words. Nana wasn't normally a late night visitor. In fact, she hardly visited at all. Was Nana suspicious because she'd avoided popping in to the St Agnes school shop to say hi for a few days? Their weekly little ritual was for Holly to drop by in a break, or straight after school, but before the afternoon practices. They would catch up over tea and rusks and Nana would give her a task of sorting uniform drawers or helping with stock counting. But Nana could just have sent a WhatsApp message if she was worried?

She heard them talking as she tiptoed out of her room and towards the cupboard at the end of the passage in the dark. She waited for them to go into the kitchen and for the kettle to hiss before she crept inside and closed the door. She pushed between unused raincoats and the garden umbrella and wedged up against the Christmas decorations box. Not much had moved since the hide-and-seek days of the Barefoots. As she shrouded her head amongst the coats and smelled the mildew, her Barefoot games didn't seem so long ago. She had sat here often enough, tuned to the sound of the Seeker, knowing she could secret herself there and hear every word. She sat and waited for them to return to the sitting room, noticing the swing-ball and two pairs of old rollerskates stacked in the corner. She wished those toys were still useful to her. The gap in the wooden strips of the doors were still wide enough for her to hear everything and see enough without being detected.

'You're not going to thank me. I thought of saying nothing. But we need to talk, for Holly's sake,' Nana said as they returned to the living room. She was rocking from one foot to the other in front of the fireplace. She could only see Nana's legs and up to her waist.

'Is she in trouble at school?' She couldn't see Mum, but she knew she was on the other side of the room from her voice. As far away as she could get from Nana.

'It's a mess, Grace. I'm not sure I understand it. There's a version doing the rounds that she had sex with some Hill House hero of a boy. It could just be a rumour.' Mum blew out a big huff.

‘Holly? Having sex? For God’s sake Angelica, she hasn’t even stopped climbing trees!’

‘I know, I know. Please Grace, I don’t want to believe it myself. Let’s hope it’s not true, but …’

‘What have you heard? Who did you hear it from?’

‘The girls talk to me in the school shop. Especially the younger girls. I suppose I’m some sort of confidante – they see me as a type of granny figure. But I don’t think they all know that I’m her gran. Well not the juniors, anyway.’

Nana started to pace on the loose patterned rug that hid a patch of black burn-holes in the fitted carpet underneath. Her fault. One freezing evening she’d made a fire from some pine cones she found in the forest. Her plan was to surprise Mum and Dad when they came home from work. But a cone shot a resin spark onto the carpet and, while she tried to beat out the flames, they got fatter and fatter as she smacked them. Dad walked in just in time. If he hadn’t, the house could have burnt to the ground.

‘I’m listening, Angelica. What did they say?’ Mum asked. Holly wanted to block her ears. Then she thought of jumping out the cupboard and telling them. Or maybe she should try to climb out a window and run away. She wanted to do all those things at once. Instead she sat and listened to her heart thudding in her temples.

‘It seems the boy bragged to a few friends. You know, notches on the headboard ...’

‘But when did this all happen? How?’

‘I don’t know exactly, Grace. The girls were talking yesterday, so I suppose it happened over the weekend. You know how quickly these rumours grow. This bloody social media, it’s like a bushfire. I stewed on it overnight, trying to convince myself they weren’t talking about Holly. Trying to work out how to tell you.’ Mum’s legs moved into her view and she slumped into an armchair next to the fireplace.

‘Are you sure it’s her they’re talking about?’

‘They didn’t mention her by name. But the skinny redhead in matric? What do you think?’

She wanted to jump out and explain. What would be the best place to start? Maybe by saying it’s a big fat lie. She tried a quick practice of the words in her head. They sounded clumsy. How do you say, ‘Okay, you got me there. But it’s not quite like they say’. What if they believed him and not her? Who was on her team? Dad would have been, but, of course, he wasn’t much use to her now. And since he’d died it felt like Mum and Nana hadn’t worried about whose team they were on, as long as it wasn’t each other’s. So one would probably believe her, and one wouldn’t, and they’d fight all over again. And this time, it would be her fault.

‘Look, girls exaggerate. Let’s first find out the facts.’

‘What exactly did they say, Angelica?’

‘There’s a boy, Dodge, they call him. He’s in matric, and the big heartthrob I gather. He bragged to a friend who then told a friend who then told a girlfriend … well, you know how it goes.”

‘I know Dodge – he’s Duncan. I teach him. Bright kid. I sensed from classroom banter that the girls are mad about him. But Holly? She seems so disinterested in boys … She’s so young. Oh God, how did I miss that the classroom jibes from other boys were hinting at something with Holly?’ She watched Mum’s legs pacing. As she changed direction it seemed her thoughts changed too.

‘I’ve given her too much freedom – always being teased about my feral child in the staff room … treats all these boys like they’re buddies or brothers, not boyfriends.’

‘Look, Grace, let’s not speculate. Give her the benefit of the doubt.’ Nana pushed herself up and Holly watched her legs head towards Dad’s old study. ‘Any chance of something stronger than tea? I’m sure you could do with one too. Mind if I pour us each a whiskey?’

Mum followed her and she watched two pairs of legs disappear around the corner. It would take them long enough to find glasses and whiskey in that chaos. She could sneak off in that time. She slipped out of the cupboard and down the passage to her room. She lay in her bed and watched the curtains flap. The wind panted against her windowpane and then began to moan. She wished she could run away, but to whom? To where? She heard their voices rise and fall. She didn’t need to hear the words to recognise that its pitch had the sound of disguised disagreement.

CHAPTER 7

DODGE

Post-match analysis

He got dressed. Not that there was much to put on – shorts, T-shirt, slip-slops. He felt embarrassed to watch her neaten herself up. Even though he couldn't see much in the dark, looking away seemed the less awkward thing to do. He walked to the door and put his ear up against it. It would be stupid to get caught now. It was quiet. He unlocked the door and opened it slightly. The coast looked clear – still and dark out here.

He was taken by surprise when her hand was on his, grabbing the door handle. She jerked at it and yanked the door open. She shoved him aside, slipped through the door and bolted off into the damp darkness.

'What's the big rush?' he shouted after her. 'Not even a kiss goodbye?' No reply. He heard a dog bark in the distance and lowered his voice. 'It's a pleasure,' he called softly. Then, in a hoarse whisper, 'I thought you were pretty cute, Blue Roses …'.

He made his way back to his house. He bolted in between the dark buildings and then got to the chapel where he hid in the shadow of a pillar and waited again. Silence. He crossed the faintly lit walkway. His slops flapped between his feet and the tar. He stopped and took them off, then continued. He trotted across the cold grass down the hill, his bare feet now padding quietly as he approached Warrior's Way. Again he stopped to listen and watch from behind a tree trunk. Nothing. On he went. Almost there. Then, out of nowhere, a guard appeared in front of him with a flashlight, just as he was about to turn down the road to Upper House.

'Good evening, Sir.'

'Jesus, you gave me a fright!'

'Sorry Sir. It's after lights out, why are you out of the house?'

'Couldn't sleep,' Dodge ran his hand through his hair. 'I was worrying … I left my rugby boots at the side of the field after practice.' His heart thumped. The guard shone his flashlight into Dodge's face and said nothing. Dodge filled the awkward silence. 'Please give me a break – my mom'll kill me if I lose another pair of boots. I needed to find them.'

'But where are the boots?' asked the guard. He hesitated, shifted from foot to foot a few times.

'Umm, that's the problem … I couldn't find them. Brand new too. I am going to be in such kak with my parents.'

'Do you want to show me where you left them? Maybe I can help you look?'

‘Umm, it was on the benches at the side of Kidd’s, I think. But now I’m doubting myself. You know how it is when you lose something. Anyway, I looked,’ he gestured vaguely in the direction of the rugby field, ‘and they’re not where I thought they were.’

‘But you shouldn’t be out her at this time, Sir. It’s my duty to report boys out of their dorms at night. It’s for your own safety.’

‘Ja, I know, but please, just this once. I promise I’ll never do it again. I’m so close to finished here, Man. I’m writing matric …’

‘I don’t want to get anyone into trouble. But I have to do this job – there’s been a lot going on tonight. There was a teacher’s dog going crazy just now, probably because of you. Maybe others came to look? Maybe a teacher or even the Headmaster is still out and about, wondering what it’s all about. Then what?’

‘Look, I get it. But c’mon dude … can we come to some sort of arrangement? I mean, I don’t have anything on me now. But I could get something to you – just tell me where I could leave it? I could leave you some money, say, hidden in a tree somewhere?’

‘I don’t want anything, Sir. Please, just return to your house, now. Quickly.’ The guard turned as he finished speaking and walked away down the road, his flashlight now scanning bushes on the left and right of the road as he walked.

Must be a shitty job being a night watchman, he thought to himself. But Jesus, the way this lot loved their rules. He was so over school. Seriously, they weren’t in kindergarten anymore. Anyway, it could have been worse. He jogged down the path, punched the house code into the keypad and slipped inside. He crept upstairs and sneaked through the darkness to the matric common room to grab a glass of cold water out the fridge on his way to bed.

‘And so?’ Braces was up against him and shining his phone torch into his face.

‘Shit! I swear you almost gave me a heart attack!’

‘Why so jumpy?’ said Runty, who was lying on the couch and acting casual, paging through some dumb magazine and pretending to be interested in it. Scratcher, the head of house, stood with his back to the room at the kettle and appeared to be willing it to boil. Dodge snatched the magazine out of his hands and sat down next to Runty. He held onto his chest. His heart was whipped against his ribs.

‘Christ! Will you guys give me a break? What a night. Ran into a guard on the way back. Almost got cuffed. Now you two leaping out the shadows at me! I’ve spent my evening staring into torchlights, like some spy movie or something. Anyway, why aren’t you in bed?’

‘Why d’you think? C’mon, share the spice. What happened? Did she? Or were you given bat?’ quipped Runty. Belt appeared round the corner. He was obviously listening through the partition wall from his study next to the common room.

‘Yeah, tell us,’ demanded Braces.

‘And don’t spare any details,’ chipped in Belt. They flopped down on top of Dodge and started rubbing his hair, elbowing him and socking him on the arm.

‘Well, she’s pretty cool actually. A bit hyper and all that. Not sure about her yet, really, but she seems like, I dunno … she’s interesting.’

‘We weren’t asking for a full character analysis, dude! Spare us the *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* or *Macbeth* essay answer,’ taunted Brad.

‘The suspense is killing us. C’mon. Did you give her the salute?’ grinned Belt as he thrust his hips backwards and forwards.

‘Piss off, okes. A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell.’

‘Well, then there’s no problem there – you don’t qualify,’ said Scratcher over his shoulder as he poured water into five cups. ‘Tea everyone? We may as well, seeing as we’re about to hear Dodge’s post-match analysis.’ They all wrestled and shoved at Dodge and he retorted by pushing them off and scrambling to his feet. They heard a knocking from below. Mr Wessels’ first warning salvo from his Housemaster’s study downstairs.

‘Shhhhhh’ hissed Belt and Braces in chorus.

‘So did you?’ whispered Belt.

‘C’mon Dodge. Tell us. You’re such a pussy. I bet you didn’t, and you’re acting all like “gentlemen don’t tell and shit” ’cause you don’t want to admit,’ mocked Scratcher in a low voice. The knocking on the wall came again. Then Wessels’ voice.

‘Cut it out, you guys. Do you want me to come up there to check on you like you’re a bunch of New Poeps?’

‘No Sir. Sorry Sir,’ replied a chorus of voices.

‘Empty Wessels is going to have our nuts if we don’t shut this down, guys,’ whispered Scratcher.

‘Ag, he’s all fart and no shit, old Empty. We’re going nowhere till we get the answers we’re looking for from Romeo over there,’ said Belt quietly as he moved towards Dodge and began shoving at him. They scuffled and leaned into one another.

‘I can hear every word, boys! Doesn’t sound like you’re discussing matric work to me. I. Expect. More. Decorum. From. My. Leaders. Of. This. Institution.’

Belt and Braces gestured as if conducting an orchestra in time to the rising pitch in Wessels' words. Scratcher directed a whisper at the floor.

'Yeah, right, Empty! You can't hear a thing when we're right under your nose in your own classroom.' Then he called out loudly, 'Sorry Sir, I'll make sure they disperse now, Sir.'

'I'm counting on you to take control, Ross,' came Wessels' voice up through the floorboards again.

'I won't disappoint, Sir,' said Scratcher. Runty made quiet sucking noises between his teeth and lips at Scratcher. Belt and Braces began another two-man skit, the one sticking out his arse, while the other bent over and kissed it. Then they reversed their roles and did the same again. Scratcher stood up and walked towards the door. He turned and spoke quietly.

'Okay, time to break this up, okes. But before this meeting is adjourned, I am giving Dodge one last chance to show us that he is more than just a giant vagina. Now, I ask you, in front of this esteemed group of gentlemen who deserve nothing but the truth, did you or did you not give Holly Weaver the Senior Salute?'

Dodge walked to the middle of the common room and turned to face his friends, who all looked up at him with expectant grins. Two of them muffled giggles into their scarves. He paused for effect, frowned in mock annoyance, and waited until they were silent. He stood upright, with his feet together, his back straight and his chest puffed out. He raised his right hand to above his eyebrows and gave a salute, and maintained a stern face. Belt and Braces gave three short dog-howls in harmony.

'Oow, ooow, oooow!' Runty jumped up and went over to Dodge and high-fived him and hugged him and slapped him on the shoulder. Then they all began high-fiving and slapping each other on the backs. Brad Hay walked into the common room.

'What's all the fuss about guys? What have I missed?'

'The Senior Salute, you dog!' growled Scratcher.

'And she is so damned hot! I thought she was a bit of an ice queen. Turns out it's always worth a shot,' said Runty.

'Who are you talking about? Dodge, who did you bone now?' said Brad. Wessels shouted from below.

'Right, that's it boys! You will all have early rising tomorrow morning. I will see you in my office at 6 am.' The room was silent. Six grins reappeared as Dodge clicked his heels together and saluted again.

Runty took out his phone and took a photo of Dodge in salute pose with his friends grinning and pulling faces by his side. Scratcher shooed them out the room as he called down to Empty Wessels.

'Fair enough, Sir. Apologies, Sir. We will report for duty at 6 am, Sir.' They took the cue and left the room in silence.

His phone pinged, but it was chilly, so he decided not to get out of bed to fetch it from the desk on the other side of his study. He shifted to face the window. The rain was coming down hard now. He pulled his duvet tighter around himself and stared at the shadows of trees performing a grotesque dance on the wall. They were a strange reminder of her drama performance from the previous term. That was the second time she'd caught his attention. All the best matric drama students from the schools in the region were there to perform their final drama monologue pieces at the Hill House theatre. He'd had detention for his hair being too long after two warnings to cut it. It turned out the decision to take his chances with long hair so he could look good for the holidays had backfired. The punishment was to be the usher for the audience. His plan was to sneak out once he had taken tickets and shown people to their seats. The teachers on duty were so switched off that once the house lights dimmed and the first performance began, he knew he'd make his escape unnoticed.

She was first up. She stood at the front of the dimly lit stage and spoke out into the dark void in a clear, throaty voice.

'I will be doing a monologue from *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennesee Williams.' He thought he recognised her red hair, but doubted himself for a minute. Although her hair still seemed reddish in the theatre lights, it was tied back in a tight ponytail – not wild and fuzzy like she was in the plane tree. For the rest she also looked different to how he remembered. Smaller and paler. She kneeled in the middle of the lit stage and cupped a little glass animal in her hand. She wore a black leotard and black ballet shoes. He still wasn't sure it was her until she started moving on stage. She played the character of a southern American girl and she nailed the accent. Her voice was soft and scared as she spoke to her imaginary mother about being crippled and being embarrassed to go outside with a noisy fake leg. She dragged that leg. Now she was like a crippled exotic bird, or a wounded cat, but still she had the agility of a small animal, like she had in that plane Tree. He felt as if she knew the crippled girl or, if he hadn't seen her before, he would have believed she really was crippled. She was that real. She seemed frail and scared, in this way so different to that plane tree parrot. Her eyes seemed to look straight at him as he hid in the darkness at the back of the theatre.

Her name in the monologue was Blue Roses, and he decided then that this would become his nickname for her. There would be a next time as soon as possible and he needed to read that play. So the first stage of the plot for that next time was born. Over the holidays he read the play and he remembered Holly up her tree and decided that, like Blue Roses, the real world was too brutal for her. Her on-stage clumsy-sleek movements drifted through his thoughts as he read about a fractured relationship between a mother and a daughter. He wondered how clever it would be to get involved with a teacher's daughter. By the time he returned to school for the final term he'd written off the idea as a bad one. Then his friends taunted that he was 'saggies' for giving up before he'd even tried.

'Faint heart never fucked fair maiden,' quipped Runty. Damn his friends. Damn her for sitting up that tree at the beginning of this term and flirting with him.

CHAPTER 8

HOLLY

Early Warning Systems

She woke early and got dressed for school quickly. Through her sleeplessness she decided that if Mum raised anything that morning, she would say as little as possible. Wing it as she went along. But her plan was to avoid Mum for now, which would be easy enough because Mondays were always busy days that started early for both of them. The lift scheme from Hill House into the village for the staff members' children worked like clockwork on a roster system, and it wouldn't be unusual for them to exchange passing greetings in the busy start to the week. There were always two rides into town – the early birds' ride, for those who had sports practice or other pre-school commitments would be leaving soon from the McKenzie gates. Mum wasn't on the morning lifting roster this week. So, with luck, she would hopefully avoid her altogether until later when she'd figured out what to say.

The house was still quiet. She tiptoed down the stairs with her school shoes in her hand and her school bag over her shoulder. She would hear Mum or the twins as they began to surface upstairs. If they stirred, she would call up the stairs to say bye, and gap it out the back door before there was time for proper conversation.

As she flicked on the kettle she heard Sarge's tail thumping in his basket. He yawned and stretched and waddled to the back door to be let out. She opened the door for him and he gave her a cursory rub of gratitude on his way past. He lifted his leg against a garden pot, then sat for a while. The Master surveying his estate. A small flock of guinea fowl had come for their breakfast on the lawn. He pricked his ears and went into a crouch. They whistled softly and scratched at the grass. He crept towards them and then stopped. One paw raised, ears pricked. They continued to cluck. She imagined they were muttering to each other through those whistles.

'Here he comes again. Dumb dog. Okay guys, you know the drill. Give him his fun. Act busy. Whistle on. Pretend he's invisible. Can't help himself, here he comes. Make it feel real for him. Okay, now boys, now. Fly boys, fly.' Same routine every day. He chased, they fled. He never caught them, and they always got away. They were safe in the flock, which was full of early warning systems.

She heard a toilet flush upstairs and taps run. She grabbed an apple and a yoghurt out of the fridge, stuffed them into her bag and called upstairs.

‘I’m off Mum! Sorry, I’m catching the early bird today. Forgot about stuff I need to do. See you later.’ Mum’s voice came back at her.

‘Holly, wait! I need to discuss something with you.’

‘Ma, I can’t! Later. Cheers.’ She dashed out the door, her shoes still in her hand. She dropped them at her feet, slipped them on and ran up the driveway and off towards the gates. Sarge gave her a few yips as if to say, ‘See you later too’, and then continued in his fruitless guinea fowl stalk.

She arrived to first lesson to find that her desk had been shunted to one side and was now in a back corner of the classroom. It used to be in a middle row. While other desks in the classroom were jammed together and touching, the gap between hers and all the others nearby desks was as wide as it could possibly be without attracting the teacher’s wrath. As she opened the top wooden flap of her desk to take out her books, she found a note stuck inside the lid, ‘Holly Weaver is a slut!’ She waded through scatterings of condom packets to get to her books. She pretended to search and fiddle behind the lid while she rearranged her expression. She withdrew from the safety of her desk to see Olivia and Khanya whispering behind cupped hands.

Murmurs followed her all morning as she moved between classrooms. The rumours had obviously started over the weekend in response to the late Saturday night Instagram post that started doing the rounds on Sunday morning. When she woke she went onto Instagram to unfollow him. As she flicked to his profile, she saw the photo of him surrounded by a bunch of mates, all grinning while saluting. He had made some sleazy comment to the post that was put up by someone else, but she didn’t even really get what he meant. She just knew it sounded bad. In a panic, she posted one short comment, ‘Not true. I said no.’ As soon as she did, she regretted saying anything. Her nerves were shot and she didn’t want to speak to anyone, so she switched off her phone for the rest of the weekend and hoped the whole thing would die down quickly. Now social media had obviously gone from a twitter to a shriek, and her school day was going from bad to worse.

When it was break she left the classroom quickly and ducked into the bathroom to hide in a toilet cubicle with her eyes closed. She plugged in her earphones and played her music on shuffle. The lyrics did nothing more than muffle the conversation outside the cubicle door. That was good enough.

Exhaustion washed over her and she felt as if she was too tired to cry. Maybe tears run out? Over her music she heard a huddle of girls bang open the bathroom door, crowding together. She tucked up her feet so that nobody would see her shoes if they looked under the

door. She needn't have bothered to conceal herself that carefully, as there was no intention on anyone's part to soften their vitriol for any audience. Girls flooded in and out and bitched insult upon insult in thick layers. She imagined them examining themselves in the mirror and messing up their hair as they spoke.

'You see, I was right. Haven't I been saying there's something a bit off about her for years?' That sounded like Sarah.

'My brother says she's just pissed because Dodge got what he wanted, then ditched her.' Alex.

'Indeed, revenge hath no fury like a woman scorned,' said Harriet in her haughtiest Shakespearean voice. They all giggled.

'Don't be such bitches, Bitches!' said Kath. 'Have you forgotten she's one of us?'

'Yes, what about the sisterhood?' came another voice she couldn't identify.

'Please don't all lay your feminist crap on us. Holly drifted off into the night to meet a boy in a secret place – that's just dumb! What did she think she was going there for? A cosy chat?'

'Exactly, Sarah! I've got nothing against Holly personally. Sweet girl in a sticks-to-herself kind of way, but really? I've heard she was wearing next to nothing. Like a pair of elastic-waisted shorts, a T-shirt and a bra. Not even panties! That's what I've heard, anyway. Now if that's not asking for it?' She blocked her ears. She tried to make the voices indistinguishable. But still the louder voices seeped through to her, or maybe it was just the cruellest voices that cut deepest.

'He is sooo hot. Honestly, who's going to block someone that gorgeous? She'd have to be mad. I just don't believe it's possible. I must say, I'm not sure I would be able to resist.'

'Sis! Not everybody spreads their legs as easily as you, Bella.'

'I'm not saying go the whole way, Bitch! But you know, he really is cute. I do see why she agreed to meet him in a secret place. I would've.'

'But why would he go for Holly, is the question? All that red hair, those skinny legs and those big, starey eyes. Like … like … I dunno, some toxic tropical spider. When he could pick anyone?'

'It's obvious why. She's a sure thing! He knew he'd get what he wanted. My Mum says all boys are the same, only after one thing. Not their fault really, they've got urges. They can't resist …'

'I bet you she's been putting out for years – living on that campus surrounded by all those boys … My father is an old boy …'

‘Yes, Harriet, we know, you’ve told us that like a million times.’

‘Well it’s relevant to my story.’

‘Of course it is …’ three voices said in unison. Harriet persisted.

‘My father says it’s just not right her living right there under all those boys’ noses like that and running around as if she’s one of them. He says it’s been coming for a long time and she shouldn’t cry foul now.’

The bell rang and they bashed their way out of the room. She sat still. What did it matter if she was punished for bunking? At least she’d get detention and not have to spend her breaks avoiding talking to anyone and hiding in toilets.

She heard a pair of feet shuffle outside the cubicle door. The tap ran and paper towel was pulled from the dispenser. She tried to slow her breath.

‘Holly?’ said a voice. She didn’t recognise it. ‘Holly? If you’re in there, I get why you’re hiding. I’m sorry about … well, about what’s happened.’ She sat still and tucked her legs up higher in case this girl tried to peer under the door. ‘Holly, I don’t know if I can help you. But maybe you want to talk? If you want to …’ said the voice. ‘I’m not going to force my advice on you. If your message meant what I think it did, you’re in for a whole lot of counselling and stuff. Not sure if you’re there yet, ready to speak or anything? It’s all exhausting and nothing helps much. Well that’s what I found, anyway. But I’m around if you like. I’ve been through …’ A nervous, icy laugh sliced through the cubicle door. ‘What am I saying? “Hashtag me too”, I guess. I’m still not sure how that helps. But maybe it will help you. I think you’ll be able to find me. I can’t quite explain it, but you’ll come to learn, if you haven’t already. You’ll recognise the look, now that you’re in the club. It’s like a secret handshake. But not so secret and not such a small club.’ The feet shuffled a bit further away and her voice had turned into a hoarse whisper. Then the feet moved again and the door slammed.

Now what? She couldn’t sit there all day. She’d have to slipstream her way back into the system in the rush between lessons. She sat and waited for the bell to ring. Why would she want to talk or get advice? She hadn’t even really told anyone yet and there were already more than enough opinions going around. Besides, who would believe her version now that a few days had passed and she hadn’t been to a doctor or anything?

The afternoon improved and felt easier than sitting in the classroom. She buried herself in her practices. Her ballet class carried her away to imaginary places where the light was soft and the music was gentle. Miss Susan drew her out of her thoughts once or twice when she didn’t follow instructions, but her words weren’t stern, and she almost seemed apologetic for

dragging Holly out of her dreamy state. The distractions felt good, so she continued through her afternoon. In jazz band rehearsal she caught herself tapping her foot as she played her sax and was transported away once more, this time to a place of white smiles and big hair. She could manage this disaster if she just stayed busy.

CHAPTER 9

DODGE

The sound of words slipping down eddies

‘“Even tho she thinks I am a fuckboi she’s whipped” – what does that even mean, Duncan?’ He winced at his mother using the word. She wasn’t a swearer.

‘It’s all a joke, Ma. A stupid joke that I shouldn’t have posted. I’ve learnt my lesson. Can we forget about it?’

‘Maybe, but first just explain to me, what’s a “fuckboi”, Duncan?’

‘Ma, it’s slang for a good time guy, someone who likes having fun.’

‘It sounds rapey to me, not slangy.’ She sounded more tired than angry. ‘And the combination of “fuckboi” and “whipped” sounds really classy. Translate please?’

‘Ma, do we have to do this? Can I phone you later?’

‘Actually yes we do, Duncan. As I understand it – and I concede I don’t understand Instagram or Twitter or God-knows-what social media platform – someone has put a photo of you with a big fat salute in a picture surrounded by your mates. Then there’s a whole lot of creepy comments that suggest you’ve been bragging about what you’re up to with some girl. Is that the gist of it?’

‘Ma, it wasn’t bragging, I was sort of pressured into owning up.’

‘Duncan. Grow a spine!’ Her voice was becoming shrill.

‘Ma, do we have to do this?’

‘I have to hear this from your brother overseas, which presumably means a whole lot of people here have seen it too, so yes, we have to do this and we need to do it now. It seems I need to police what you put out there. You’re eighteen Dunc. I wish I didn’t have to monitor you still, but it seems I do. I’d like to understand what we’re dealing with?’ He tried to sound casual in his response.

‘Ma, we’re not dealing with anything. It’s a stupid photo that Runt … that someone took.’

‘I should’ve known. I’ve warned you about that Runty. He’s trouble with a capital T.’

‘Ma, it wasn’t Runty’s fault. It was a bunch of us just … I responded to their banter as a sort of joke. It’s what guys do.’

‘Really, Duncan? Why the need to brag? This thing could backfire badly. What’s all this stuff about the change room? Are you allowed in there with a girl?’ She annoyed him so much when she asked rhetorical questions.

‘No, Ma, you know it’s a first team only privilege.’

‘So why did you take her there?’

‘It’s a long story Ma. It’s kind of a tradition in the last term of matric.’

‘Okay, so you honour the tradition and you have to brag all over social media about it? Even though you know you’re breaking school rules? Was it at night? After lights out?’

‘Yes, Ma. I know, Ma. It was a mistake, but it’s no big deal.’

‘No big deal. Is there anything else about this little tryst you need to tell me?’

‘Ma, I stuffed up, but it’s going to be okay. I’ll make it okay.’

‘I hope so. But why, Dunc? It’s not always a competition you know. I don’t get this need to show everyone you’ve won the girl, you know?’

‘Ma, please don’t lecture me.’

‘It’s a few weeks to go till you’re finished school, that’s all. Please just keep your nose clean till the end. You’re almost there.’

‘Sure Ma. I’ll chat to you soon, okay? Got to go to practice.’

‘Okay. Duncan, be sensible please. I worry because I care. You know that, right?’

‘Love you too, Ma. Bye.’

He made a mental note to check all his social media apps to take the picture down and to ask his friends to do the same. Problem was he knew it was out there already and too late. Stupid, stupid fool! Not much chance of pulling it back now. But surely it wasn’t that damning? He reckoned he could explain it.

Then the call came from Pops that evening. After they said their hellos the conversation quickly turned to rugby. No surprises there. Dodge had got used to the fact that Pops prioritised sporting advice over anything else.

‘Oh well, Dodge, just ignore Coach Hay if you need to. He’s a knob anyway. I just want you to maintain your own fitness programme through this phase till the end of school and then I’ll begin work with you through the holidays on the schedule they’ve sent from the States. For now you stick to your own strategy.’

Skype rather than a phonecall meant it was important stuff, ‘so we can eyeball each other’, Pops would say. He guessed Ma had alerted Pops to the Instagram post and put him in to bat. He also knew Pops would start with rugby banter and then subtly move across to the real reason for the call. He was never really sure if Pops chose sporting analogies to explain life because of their mutual passion for rugby, or because Pops simply saw the whole of life as one long rugby metaphor. Either way, he knew Pops had something he needed to get off his chest and he should sit quietly and nod in response and not argue or defend himself. Pops’ fists thumped the kitchen counter as he jammed his ideas down the screen.

‘Just remember three things,’ he said, as if it was possible to forget the homespun wisdoms that were rolled off weekly. ‘You’ve got what it takes and you know that.’ He shoved finger one into the air. ‘Don’t let the opposition get inside your head.’ Finger two joined its stocky mate with equal force. ‘Go out on the attack – the team will always follow an attacking leader,’ gestured a crooked finger three with equal conviction. That seemed like four bits of advice, but he wasn’t going to argue.

In the background he saw Ma moving in and out of the screen, busying herself with wiping and stacking pots and putting place mats away in the drawer. Tidying as usual. He imagined them planning the conversation before phoning him to pretend everything was normal. They probably ate cottage pie for two with peas and butternut. He felt a prickle of resentment as he imagined them, a sorry pair of empty nesters sitting up in Jo’burg with nothing better to do than panic about their youngest son’s misdemeanours and then dress up the panic as something else, making it seem like a routine newsy Tuesday evening chat. The real point of Pops’ call would be reiterated in an email of instructions that would follow the call. A To-Do List.

Duncan wondered why they did that as a family. It’s what they always did. The stuff they said formed an eddy that swirled around what they actually wanted to say. Meanwhile the real stuff in the middle got sucked under. So it was no surprise that Pops used sporting strategy to give clues on how he thought he should handle himself off the sports field. The language came easiest to Pops that way. He also knew Ma would hover in the background and probably not say much. She’d stack and wipe and sort to make her world right.

He saw Pops fill his glass again as he spoke. Ma came past and lifted the almost empty bottle and wiped the maroon ring off the counter surface.

‘Will you stop with the obsessive cleaning, Rina! Can’t a man relax in his own home? This can be done by the maid in the morning.’ It wasn’t like Pops to crack at Ma in front of him. Sure, they weren’t exactly lovebirds. But that’s another conversation that just didn’t happen and another space Ma tidied her way around. He guessed they had argued before calling him, probably about how to manage the conversation. Ma would have insisted Pops discuss it. Pops would have pronounced that they should leave him to figure it out himself. Ma moved away but continued to wipe.

‘Maybe Duncan should consider the coach’s views? Gary Hay has probably done his homework and knows a bit about pre-season training and the American rugby system and what they’re expecting of Duncan. Certainly he’ll know more than us? I mean, of course you know Dunc best, but maybe the coach knows a bit more because he’s had other boys get

overseas on rugby scholarships?' Was this conversation about rugby and coaching and nothing more? She was trying to smooth over the fact that he had just raged at her in front of Duncan, but she wasn't conceding without making her own point. Pops played along and turned all jokey.

'Oh, so now you're a rugby expert as well, are you?' He slugged the rest of his wine and through a thin smile added, 'Incredible really, considering your illustrious sporting career. Remind me, Captain of the Under Fourteen F netball team, right?' His standard remark to Ma when she offered an opinion on sport. She smiled her own thin smile back at him and brushed an imaginary stray hair off his shoulder. Her unspoken way of saying, 'Take it easy'.

He watched Pops drain the bottle into his glass. He thumped it back onto the counter, creating another purple ring almost exactly where Ma had wiped away the first. Her cloth moved towards the stain.

'Perhaps respect for a teacher is never a bad thing?' she said quickly, almost too quick to hear. Then, ''Night, Dunc,' and she disappeared from the screen.

'G'night Ma. Sleep tight.'

Pops then got down to what he needed to say, in his roundabout way.

'So I hear you've been honouring a few Hill House change room traditions?' Pops pretended to look stern, but was happy to reveal a slight smile of approval at the same time.

'Ja, I guess you could put it that way.' He felt his skin burn.

'Ha, don't blush! These are all rites of passage, my boy. Just don't get caught doing anything stupid, huh? Keep it tidy.' How much did he know? Had he also seen the picture? What exactly had they heard? Was he on the edge of trouble, or would this thing blow over? Shit! What the hell made him pose for that picture?

He was tempted to shout down the line, 'Can I stop pretending?' He wanted to explain, to ask for help, to hear them yell at him, to admit he was scared, to say he was wrong, to say he was sorry, to ask them to advise him. To let him start again somehow. But instead the words whirlpooled away and he conceded.

'Got it, Dad.' After all, that's what all sons of Charles and Rina Chylde do, like Charles Chylde himself, and his brothers before them. They all watched words sink down vortices and hoped like hell the water closed quickly over the sunken words so they didn't get sucked in behind them. They didn't say, 'I don't want to go to an American university and use rugby as the meal ticket'; 'I'm not interested in rugby and want to give up now; I hate science and wish I'd taken art for matric. I want to stay in South Africa and I don't know what I want to be one day.' And they were definitely not the type to say, 'I've really cocked up here and I

want your help. I have done something terribly wrong.' Instead, they always went off to kick a ball about a hundred times until they could slot it between a pair of rugby posts from any angle. They were all trained by Charles to do it, and do it until nobody could kick it better. And they all became rugby heroes and muscled their way into first teams, then American universities, so they could leave this shithole of a country behind them to make a fresh start. That's just what the Chylde family did. They acted like things were under control until they convinced themselves they were.

Pops said his goodnight and switched off the Skype video, but not the audio function. Not exactly a techno genius old Pops. Duncan heard a cork being pulled out another bottle and wine sloshing into a glass. He heard him slurp from his glass again. He heard the bottle being knocked over. He imagined the contents bleeding over the counter and off the edge onto the floor. From his black laptop screen he heard Pops mutter to himself and his voice echoed in the kitchen.

'He'd better not go down for this. He's worked too hard and he's too damned good. Please God, my boy can't go down.'

Then he heard the kitchen stool scrape against the floor and his footsteps disappear up the stairs. He knew Pops would have turned right at the top of the stairs into the spare room. He hung up the Skype call, with a 'bllloop' response from his laptop. If words made noises as they slipped down eddies, he imagined they'd make that same Skypey sound. 'Bllloop.'

He lay on his bed. He heard a dog bark drift across the school grounds and he thought about Pops' growly voice. He remembered a dog that guarded a house in their neighbourhood when he was a little kid. He must have been about five years old. Fridays were his favourite days because Pops would walk him around the corner from home to pre-school as a special treat. Every Friday. The first time they did the walk, as he turned right at the corner at the top of their block, this huge black Rottweiler threw himself against the fence trying to get at them. He was howling like crazy, really going mad. He flew behind Pops' legs and hid his face in the creases of his trousers. Pops took his hand and led him across to the other side of the road. That old Rottweiler was leashed to a long chain that was tied to a pole in a concrete yard. He stretched his leash, almost to breaking point, as he ran the length of the fence, howling and throwing himself up against it. After that, each Friday, they crossed the road and walked on the other side. He told Pops he hated that dog. He thought about Pops' reply. 'He's a good dog, my boy. He's just doing his job. He's a guard-dog. He doesn't know the goodies from the baddies, so he growls at every person that passes. His job is to keep his family safe, and they should treat him better than that."

CHAPTER 10

HOLLY

Confessions work best in cars

How had things gone from the point when she decided she wasn't going to tell anyone, to the whole world having a theory about what happened? The decision had been taken away from her, thanks to all the stuff buzzing around on social media. So she knew she had to say something to Mum, at least, and probably Nana too. And it had to be done soon. Like tonight.

She sat in a corner of the library trying to concentrate on her history notes, while waiting for Mum's usual message to say, 'On my way. Meet me at the blue bench'.

The Women's Movement. Her thoughts drifted away from the pages and pushed the contents aside. There should be another word for it. A word that lets everyone know what she said and what he did. The word needed to reflect degrees of guilt. Of course the feminists disagree. Feminists say no is no. She thought she was a feminist. Mum certainly was, but she couldn't explain to Mum in words that made sense.

Nana would say she mustn't say anything to anyone. But she didn't need to – the thing had gone viral anyway. Mum would take the opposite view from Nana, on principle, so she would want the story to be owned. She could see their reactions – they would both fly into action and between them she'd be rushed from counselling, to lawyers, to the police station to lay a charge. The same questions would be asked again and again. She wanted to lie in a small ball underneath the desk in the corner of the library where she was sitting.

The funny part was that she remembered some stuff in tiny detail. A sock lying alone, abandoned under the slatted bench in the change room. Photographs of Springboks - Hill House old boys – watching them. A mosquito whining at her neck – like the sound of a war plane about to drop a bomb. The strangeness of welcoming that sound as a distraction. The wood splinters through her T-shirt against her back – up and down, up and down. Feeling like a long nail had gone through her body and bolted her in place, onto the bench beneath her back. Then counting. But the other bits – what now seemed like it was probably the important stuff – had disappeared, as if it had never happened. She'd also forgotten who said what and through which medium.

'Shame, she's the one whose dad died. Give her a break. That's why she did it,' commented a Hill House boy on Instagram, who obviously fancied himself as a psychologist. A patronising one, at that.

'But she did ask for it,' was one response to that. Predictable.

‘Who wouldn’t want it from a Jock?’ said a girl from St Agnes. So much for the sisterhood. That girl got 47 likes.

‘Slut!’ was one reply. She wasn’t sure if the guy who posted it was talking about her, or the girl who posted the original comment. Either way, maybe he had a point.

The message pinged on her phone from Mum. She packed up her bags and walked out the library towards the blue bench. As she walked past the groups of girls, she felt the rustle of rumours blow behind her down the darkening school portals. Like leftover empty lunch packets dropped in half-open dustbins and then picked up by a gust.

She got into the car and, before she knew it, she’d gone from saying nothing to spilling her guts. Mum drove and looked straight ahead in silence. In between changing gears, her hand slipped into Holly’s and they gripped each other tight. Mum said very little and she was pleased they could both stare at the road straight ahead throughout the whole confession. At the same time, they both saw Justice hitch-hiking from his usual spot on the side of the road opposite the highway turn-off. Mum slowed, as if she was about to pick him up, then obviously thought better of it. Holly felt guilt and relief in equal measures. The car floated along the road towards home and she didn’t want to think about what would happen after this conversation. It felt like a space capsule, disconnected in space and time. She thought about the infinite blissful orbit of a consequenceless satellite having escaped its gravitational leash. She willed the journey to go on and on. By the time they drove through the McKenzie gates, the confession was complete. Or as complete as she could make it.

When they got home, Holly hurried straight to her room. On her way, she dodged saying anything to the twins who were too busy arguing over a TV remote to notice her, and she muttered a hurried, ‘Hello, Gogs’ to Gogo on her way past, hoping that Gogo was also too busy preparing supper to notice she’d been crying. As she lay on her bed she heard Mum making calls, and she knew she’d be swung into action soon enough. Mum stuck her head around the door once or twice, but Holly pretended to be sleeping. Then words like ‘police’, ‘psychologist’, ‘rape counsellor’, ‘lawyer,’ drifted up the stairs and under her door. And into her life.

Mum advised she shouldn’t read all the posts on social media. The counsellor agreed. She’d already tried that. It felt like pretending not to hear someone whispering a secret about her when she was right there – so not her style, and not how it was going to go on her watch. Those stereotypes about redheads were true if you asked Holly. She was a dyed-in-the-wool-redhead, as Dad used to say. Fiery. Too confrontational, she’d been told. Dad also used to say

she was born with a broken edit button. And a faulty volume button. Now she had all sorts of other broken bits too.

Her conversations with the psychologist made her think that maybe if she still had a dad she wouldn't have crept out at night. Maybe she wouldn't have arranged a secret meeting place with a boy she hardly knew. Maybe she wouldn't have ended up in this mess.

'But if my aunt had balls she'd be my uncle,' would have been Dad's response to that. He hated it when she said, 'if this had happened, then that would have happened'. Because what's the point, he'd ask? It didn't. What happened, happened.

Mum tried to persuade her that she didn't need to go to school.

'Matric work is basically done anyway,' she said. Mum was right. Her marks were good enough and all the year marks were complete, so the school would have given permission for her to stay away if Mum asked. She tried staying at home once. She felt trapped there, yet wasn't brave enough to go outside in case she bumped into Dodge or one of his millions of friends. So she returned to school the next day.

At lunch-break on that first day back after she had told Mum the details, she decided to go and visit Nana in the school shop, where she worked. Nana was really plugged in – to the girls in her school, to the teachers, to her neighbourhood. She didn't know exactly what Nana had heard, but she guessed that the version had developed since the evening with Mum, and she suspected the gaps had been filled in.

The real reason many of the girls went into the shop was for Nana's famous rusks and tea. She kept a kettle in the stock room and had a way of knowing if a girl had come for more than a new sports shirt. Next thing you knew, Nana was having one of her little chats with a new girl in her stock room, where she also kept tissues and hugs at the ready. Then all the girls waiting to pay just had to wait, and they knew why. She loved to brag that she was the surrogate granny for all the boarding school girls who were far away from home. Most of them had been there for reasons other than to shop at some stage in their St Agnes careers.

There were no schoolgirls there when she arrived in the shop. Nana got straight to the point.

'Holly, is there something you need to tell me?'

Holly didn't need to know what Nana knew. But she did know not to hide stuff from her, and so next thing there she was, sobbing and snotting again, and telling her all the same crumby details she had told Mum. Again she couldn't work out how she went from silence to telling all. She ran through the events again as she spoke. She got stuck on the same details again. She also started to think that her mistake didn't seem as stupid as it looked or sounded

if she considered the whole background. It was just difficult to explain that to anyone who wasn't there.

Holly didn't expect to find consolation from sitting in Nana's stock room with a cup of tea and a rusk, and Nana listening and sometimes stroking her head or patting her shoulder in silence or saying, 'It's good to talk, it helps the healing'. But it did seem to help. Sort of. Although, when her confession session was finished, Nana never said it, but Holly felt an invisible duty to consider the matter as closed, even as Nana suggested a lawyer's name. Swept away, like a neat little dirty pile that could be dusted into a dustpan and dumped into a bin from where it would be carried away on a rubbish collector truck. Never to be seen again. She also knew that, like most other times, Mum and Nana would come at this thing from different directions. So, at the end of their conversation, when Nana said, 'How would you like me to help you get over this?' she had a short, instant answer.

'I don't really know if you can, but please can you and Mum just agree?'

In assembly that week, the Headmaster, Mr Goff, gave one of his famous little talks. He preached about the 'dangers of promiscuity … old-fashioned values … the way you dress says so much…' He stared at her while he spoke. She felt her cheeks burn and looked down into her lap. She did up the bottom button on her dress that had come undone. She drowned out his sermon by thinking about Mum's rants that cropped up every time she read one of his smug Headmaster's messages in the school newsletter.

'What is a headmaster doing at such a great girls' high school anyway? In a profession so heavily dominated by women, you mean to tell me that the school board couldn't find a single female to do a better job than that … that tone-deaf man? Surely, surely, surely they could find just one woman who is better than that!'

There was a disturbance in the auditorium a few rows behind her. A girl muttered.

'What does he know about this crap?'

'Shhhhhh,' said a prefect and turned to identify the culprit. Goff beat on.

'We are all nice young ladies at St Agnes …'

'All of us? Really, Jack?' came the low voice again. 'Then show us your vagina.'

She tried not to smile as she thought of his nickname – Jack Goff. The girls in the rows around her began to titter. She didn't dare turn around to see who it was.

'I won't have this defiance,' he ranted and pointed as Holly looked up. Did he mean her? 'No, not you. Yes, you. Please leave now and we will have a conversation later.'

There was a shifting of girls in the row behind her and moving of legs to make way for someone to get past. Then she saw her running down the stairs of the gloomy auditorium to

the heavy wooden doors at the front. She fiddled with the handles and then clapped the double doors open and ran out into the sunlight and left them swinging slowly. Backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards. Mr Goff hardly broke his stride. No stopping him when he had a captive audience.

Holly returned to classes and listened to hollow words stack up in piles as teachers spoke on and on. Between her efforts to concentrate, she struggled to remember what she'd felt only a few days ago. Lessons were hard enough, and then there was Twitter and Instagram and Snapchat and Facebook that had so much to say about what she said, what she felt, what she should be feeling now. She deleted the apps from her phone, as Mum suggested. All that was left behind were imaginings of what was said out there in cyberspace, instead of knowing for certain. She wasn't sure if that was better or worse.

CHAPTER 11

NANA

A failed science experiment

‘We hadn’t seen each other since last term. He went to Jo’burg and then off to their beach cottage for a while with his family, and that whole cool crowd. He posted photos on Facebook and Instagram,’ said Holly.

‘Ah, pictures of him with other girls.’ Nana spoke over her shoulder to Holly as she boiled the kettle. Those years of being the unofficial school counsellor from her tiny stock room had taught her that girls often needed her to seem busy with something else as they confessed to foolish deeds.

‘Of course. And parties and beach braais. While my holiday highlight was a cycle to the garage shop with my little brothers to buy chips and a Coke.’

‘Smug grannies are irritating, which is why I won’t tell you how lucky you are to have that as your holiday highlight.’ She dropped a tea bag into each cup and, as it brewed, she passed her tin of rusks to Holly with a nod. Holly prised open the lid and continued.

‘Last term he popped up in front of me once or twice in the strangest places. He even rocked up at our front door once with a ball that he said belonged to the twins, when it didn’t. It seemed to me he’d timed it for when Mum and the boys were out. You know, like maybe he was keen to chat to me?’ She looked to Nana as if she needed confirmation. Nana said nothing, just nodded as if to say, ‘go on’, and patted her hand. Poor girl, no wonder she couldn’t trust her own judgement on boys’ emotions any more.

‘I wasn’t even that keen on him, but, you know, I guess I was flattered. Well, maybe a little bit keen. Then in the holidays, not a word. Just all those shiny pictures.’ Holly took the cup of tea and busied herself with dunking the rusk and trying not to drip tea onto her uniform. Always such a cautious child. Noisy, yes, and opinionated. But always the model pupil who never gave a day’s trouble, not even after her dad died.

‘Viewing photos from afar of boys that are sort of interesting should come with a health warning: “This image is likely to result in unpredictable behaviour caused by jealousy”, said Nana. She tried to soften what she was saying by reaching across and rubbing Holly’s shoulder as she spoke. Holly pulled away.

‘Nana, it wasn’t jealousy. He seemed interesting, and he certainly got more and more interested.’

‘Let me guess. After his month of silence on holiday, up he popped again once he was back at school.’

‘Yep. After he got back he sent a few text messages, well until … you know, that night.’

At times Holly seemed wise beyond her age. Then, in the next moment she would come out with a statement like this. So naïve it left her incredulous. She had an earnest look as she said foolish girly things. She’d never been able to decide whether Holly’s naïveté was a strength or a weakness. Until now, anyway.

‘Holly, now I am going to sound like that smug granny – or at least a pious one. How, in a short while, did you get from liking some cute guy with a cute story who comes to your door, to meeting him at midnight and having sex?’

‘Nana, now you’re sounding like all those – sorry to use a swear word – those bitches on social media. I thought you’d see it differently and understand? It wasn’t sex Nana. I was raped. Can’t you see the difference? I didn’t ask for it!’

‘Holly, the girl who goes off in the dark to secretly meet the guy – the girl who agrees to sneak off to a private place and gets herself locked into the first team rugby change room with him, is always going to look like she was asking for it.’

‘Nana, all I was, was the girl who was curious. The girl who has lived her whole life on a boys’ school campus as the daughter of two teachers. In fact, worse – one dead teacher and his widow. I’ve been the resident freak for years!’

‘Holly, I am trying to be sympathetic, but this sounds like self pity to me.’

‘I know I was stupid, but I was tired of being some untouchable science experiment – the girl everyone examined from a distance, but that nobody talked to.’

‘Well, if you think nobody talked to you before, crying rape isn’t going to cause a bunch of friends to line up.’

‘Nana, why are you are being so cruel? Why are you saying things like, “crying rape”, as if what I’m claiming is not true? Surely you don’t believe what you’re saying?’

‘But some people out there are going to see it that way. The lawyers are going to make everyone see it that way when they come hunting. And once they’re finished with you, you’ll be a failed science experiment.’

‘But Nana, you know me.’

‘Exactly, Holly. But not many people do. They will make this thing that happened look like it’s all your fault. They’ll say that you trapped him – had sex with a naïve boy, then cried foul – maybe because you were spurned, and so to get back at him when he stopped acting interested? They may even suggest he’s wealthy, and you’re not, and that’s why …’

‘Yep, the name they use on social media for that is “trophy hunter” – ask me, I know. But just because people say things doesn’t mean they’re true.’

‘Don’t you get it? He’s got the lawyers, he’s got the money. He’s got the big daddy on the board of governors. What have you got Holly?’

‘Nana, I’ve got the truth.’

‘Oh, my darling, I love that you think that’s enough, and I wish it was. But we’re going to have to find something else too. Think, Holly! Is there nobody or nothing else that you can think of that will support your version?’

‘Nana, I’m not ready to tell you exactly what happened, because it was so ugly. But I need you to trust me, to help me believe that the truth will win, just like you’ve always said.’

Holly fiddled in her pocket and pulled out a fist of soggy tissues. Nana took them from her and passed her a clean, dry one in their place. Maybe these days were different to her time as a young girl, but not much had really changed when it came to these sorts of allegations. Her instinct said she should push ahead and talk her out of it. But she felt tired, tired of disagreeing with her daughter-in-law, tired of being the cheerful granny, tired of being a lonely old widow who had buried her son and had to step back and pretend that his wife and children’s grief needed more attention that hers.

‘Of course I trust you, Holly, and if what you need is my support, then that’s what I’ll give you,’ she said and hugged her tightly.

Holly felt bony and small. Her hair smelled fresh and clean. She wanted to kill that boy who had done this repulsive thing to her granddaughter, but that didn’t mean she wanted Holly to stand up in front of a room full of people to say she was raped. She didn’t believe that would fix anything. But yes, for Holly’s sake she would try not to argue against Grace about their decision, and to be there with them as a united front.

‘My old friend, Tim Potter’s the man for the job if we’re going to be needing a lawyer,’ she said and did her best to give an encouraging smile. ‘He’s a gentleman, and he won’t charge us much. In fact it wouldn’t surprise me if he offered to help us as a favour.’

CHAPTER 12

MKHULU

Exchanges that mean nothing and everything

A pair of hadedas nagged their way across a pink sky. Thin white scratches of cloud appeared in the scars behind the birds' wake, as if whipped up by their clumsy wings.

He sat on the wire stool with his back against the wall of his khaya. He shook out his newspaper and watched his neighbours bustle through that in between time. The fifteen minutes when the boys of the village still own it as daytime, resisting the calls to go inside, with shouts over their shoulders of 'Please! Ten minutes, Mama,' as their dusty feet shove and struggle over a soccer ball in the fading light. The push-and-pull fifteen minutes when little girls hang out the windows or over door-tops and add chorus to the voice of their elders, 'Inside boys. Come and wash,' and then nag over their shoulders, 'But there's still enough light to play. Why do the boys get to stay out, but we're inside?' The same period that exhausted parents claim as night-time by closing up windows, putting lids on pots, pushing chickens into enclosures and announcing 'chayile time' as they heave their feet up and slump into a chair.

He observed the day-end tussle between the generations, as he paged through *The Witness* and tried to guess the scent of a spicy gravy being simmered over the open half of the stable door behind him. Was that beef shin? He listened to the sounds of cleaning – a broom scratched the floor. She hummed. He knew better than to interfere or offer help. When he tried, she would tease.

'Phuma uphele ekhishini lami khehla ndini. Uzingcolisa phansi, mese ngizogcina ngigade wena, kushe ambhodwe' – out of my kitchen old man. You'll mess my floors and I'll be watching you so I'll burn the supper.

On the evenings when he knew Justice was not on night-shift, he kept one eye on the horizon until he spotted the small silhouette of him that appeared, always alone – first as an outline that made its way across the hill, then disappeared for a while, before he reappeared at the bottom of the straight road leading up the long hill to their khaya. As he approached, he'd notice the backpack swung over one shoulder, the brown of his blazer, then the stripes on his tie, the missing buttons, and the flapping shoelaces. Like every other day, they got to the gate at the same time, and as Justice slipped his backpack off his shoulder, Mkhulu caught it and heaved it over the gate while Justice fiddled with the latch and let himself in.

'It's heavy, Grandad. So many school books. Can you manage?' he'd say.

‘I’m old but strong,’ he’d reply.

The same exchange each time that meant nothing and everything. Even if he had won the Lotto that day, which of course he had not, this was the thing he waited for daily.

But today the gap-toothed smile that usually accompanied those words was missing, and his grandson’s eyes seemed lowered. Justice sat in the kitchen quietly. Gogo asked her usual questions.

‘Ufike ngeskhati es-koleni?’ – did you get to school on time?

‘Yebo Gogo’ – yes Gogo.

‘Umsebenzi wakho weskole uwenze kahle?’ – was your homework correct?

‘Ngokuningi kwayo, Gogo’ – mostly, Gogo.

‘Uthisha wakho ukusizile ngezibalo zakho ebezinzima’ – did your teacher help you with that maths you were struggling with?

‘Nokucabanga kwami, Gogo’ – I think so, Gogo.

The answers were the usual combination of yes and no, polite as always, but Justice had no stories of his own that night. He seemed distracted when he went to join Mkhulu outside before supper. He handed his grandfather a glass of water and sat on the floor next to him with his glass. They both leaned against the wall of the khaya and stared out into the darkening night.

‘Mkhulu, can I ask you something?’

‘Sure, boy.’

‘Have you ever realised that something you did – or in fact didn’t do – caused someone harm?’

‘I think so. I can’t think of one particular thing right now, but I’m sure there are many. At my age, so many mistakes. You’ve made a mistake?’

‘A stupid mistake. But I think it will be seen as something else.’

‘What, will it seem like it was on purpose?’

‘I think so. I’m not sure. You see, I think it’s not what I did, it’s what I didn’t do that’s caused trouble.’

‘Do you want to explain?’

‘I’m not sure I should tell. I think it’s a secret.’

‘But did you do it on purpose, Justice? Or was it a mistake?’

‘No, it was a mistake. I didn’t do something that I should have.’

‘Well, then just be honest.’

‘But I’m not sure they’ll believe me.’

‘That’s their problem. That doesn’t excuse you from being honest.’

‘So if I made a mistake I must tell someone, no matter what?’

‘I would say so. And say sorry. Why wouldn’t they believe you? Are you sure you don’t want to tell me about it?’

‘I’m not sure I can. I think the person who I did it to wouldn’t want me to tell anyone about it.’

‘Is that person your friend?’

‘Yes, I think so … She used to be.’

‘She?’ He shifted in his chair. Gogo had gone quiet inside the house and he suspected she was eavesdropping. ‘Justice, is this girl-trouble? We’ve spoken about this … Leave girls for later, stick to your schoolwork.’

‘No, it’s not about me and the girl.’

‘So what kind of trouble are you talking about?’

‘It’s a girl and another boy.’

‘Then stay out of it. Don’t get involved. It’s not your business.’

‘But I like that girl. I want to help her.’

‘Ag, Justice, at your age there are lots of girls to like. Find another girl. One where there are no other boys around. Keep your life simple, man. Just stick to your studies for now.’

He could tell Justice wanted to tell him more. To talk about the details. He thought of himself at nineteen – he was already paying lobola. Should he encourage him to talk, to tell a secret? No, he didn’t want to hear what these youngsters were up to these days. He was too old for that. Anyway, he was old enough to know that the same rules always applied, no matter what the detail. So his advice was probably sound. Be honest. Say sorry. Stay away from the girl if there’s another boy in the story.

Mkhulu wanted to ask him about his plans for the next year and his university dreams. Had he posted off all the forms? Were there any more answers, or information from Howard College? How was the security guarding going? Was he saving enough? Was he managing to balance work and schoolwork? But the frogs’ chorus filled the air and spellbound them into a silence. Gogo called through the window for Justice and he got up.

‘Homework to finish off,’ he said as he took their glasses and went inside to wash them.

CHAPTER 13

GOGO

The same question all parents ask themselves

She turned on the stove and poured the oil into the pot. As it heated she began to chop an onion. Some days were harder than others to remember that the meek shall inherit the earth. Chopping and frying her second onion for the day to cook a second supper for a second family didn't make it easier. She listened for Mkhulu and Justice's voices and waited for their deep, contended rhythm to wash over her and bring her calm.

They were quieter tonight. Their tones suggested it was a private conversation. It was tempting to eavesdrop, but she reminded herself that Mkhulu's advice was often more sensible than hers. It was usually best to leave the men to discuss their business. If she was needed for an opinion she could trust Mkhulu to ask for it, even if Justice was less willing to admit she was worth listening to.

She added the beef shin to the onion and turned the meat over to brown on all sides. She worried that she hadn't managed to discuss her concerns about Holly with Nkosasane yet. The men's voices outside the kitchen window were almost inaudible now. They had dropped to a level that suggested secrecy. How foolish was she to presume that secrets weren't happening under her own roof when she was out at work? Nkosasane missed so much of what she saw and knew of the Weaver children because she worked so hard. Why would this home be any different? She reminded herself to thank God for Mkhulu's retirement – he could be counted on to watch that Justice did not fall into bad habits. Well, between Mkhulu and God, they could be counted on.

She turned the meat again and thought about her friend Aggie's son, Lwazi. Such a promising youngster that had got himself into trouble. He'd been the hope of their community with his acceptance into university, and he was the source of Justice's inspiration. Now it sounded like he was getting mixed up in those student protests. Of course she didn't have the heart to refuse lending Aggie some money for his bail, but she worried when she'd explained that he was being charged with malicious damage to property. As they walked home in the evenings Aggie would cry and ask her, 'Ngimoshe khephi?' – where did I go wrong?

Was this the same question parents asked themselves all over the world when children made mistakes? Of course she also worried if she had taught Justice the wrong values. Maybe she worried more than most because she was the grandmother, not the mother, and was old

and out of touch. But she hoped it made her wiser. She was always telling Justice to obey all instructions, no matter what. But maybe she had made Justice too meek? Sometimes she doubted she was right to teach him that beggars can't be choosers. She and Aggie spoke about these things and, to comfort her friend she said, 'Iziphi iziqumo izingane zethu ezisithathayo, Aggie? Buka thina senza konke kahle masisha kodwa sisahlupheka nje.' – What choice do these kids have, Aggie? Look at us. We have done our jobs well and quietly and here we are, still poor'.

'Kungaba njani kuthiwa sizifunela okungaphezu kwalokhu. Kubaphati bethu, kuhulumeni wethu, nasemadodeni ethu? Mhlampe kuthiwe sonke senze kanjalo, kuthiwa besanele, mhlampe ngabe sincono. Kodwa, mhlampe sasiyozithola singenamsebenzi.' – what if we had demanded more? More from our employers, our government, our men? Maybe if enough of us had done that together, maybe we'd be better off, or maybe we'd be unemployed, said Aggie.

Thinking this way didn't help her mood. She smiled as she thought of Aggie's answer a few days later.

'Ngike ngacabanga inxoxo yethu. Izingane zethu sithanda ukuthi "Ngisho nentuthwane iyakwazi ukulimaza indlovu", isisho abajwayele ukusisho eyunivesithi mesebayaganga. Mhlampe baqinisile? Kodwa wena nami Gogo, sesibadala, sesikhathele ukuthi singaba izintuthwane ezingakwazi ukulimazi izindlovu. Asikusheyele kwintsha. Ngicabanga ukuthi thini kumele simele ekuthini ifa labazehlisayo umhlaba. Sekusiphuthele thina njengezintombi ezindala ukuthi singakwazi ukushintsha indlela esicabanga ngayo.' – I've been thinking about our discussion. Our children like to say, "Even an ant can hurt an elephant" and they use this as their reason to fight the universities and cause trouble. Maybe they are right? But you and me, Gogo, we are too old and weak to be ants that are strong enough to hurt elephants. Let's leave that to the next generation. I think we should stick to believing that the meek shall inherit the earth. It's too late for us old girls to change our thinking now.

They laughed together and promised to remind each other to pray for less anger and more tolerance on those days when they were tempted to change or take chances.
She added a mix of veggies to the pot and poured water over it, and added the salt and pepper. She placed the lid on the pot and turned the heat to low. The men were quiet outside.

'Justice,' she called through the window. He appeared at the door. 'Ukudlala kuzovuthwa ngemuva kwehora, kushukuthi kunesikhashana sokuthi nenze umsebenzi wesikole.' – supper will only be ready in an hour, so you have some time to do some homework, she said.

CHAPTER 14

BIG MAC

What price this job?

'But why would you want to do this?' he said, not even attempting to hide his exasperation. 'It won't fix …' He decided to shut up. He reached into his stationery drawer and scratched for a wire paper clip. He began twisting it in his fingers. Disciplinary issues never got easier. The media's appetite for a private school scandal also seemed to be getting greedier. Was he getting too old for this job?

'Want, Mac? Do you think we want this?' Was she about to cry? She had sat across his desk so many times, always composed, always professional, always the staff member he knew he could rely on to consider all angles of any discussion.

No, wrong choice of words. Of course he knew she didn't want this. He twisted the paper clip into a tight tangle, tossed it at the bin, and missed. He pulled out another one and began to fiddle again.

'Do you think I've strolled in here on a whim because I want to cause trouble? Do you think I haven't considered all that this means? Mac, surely you know I'm here only because I don't see any other choice?'

He knew she would have given it thought. He sat in silence. All the Hill House boys joked about it – his silent treatment. But this wasn't that. Not a strategy to get a boy to confess because he could no longer bear the Headmaster's glare and his silence. This time he was silent because he had no idea what to say.

Did she still consider him a friend? He had trained himself not to think about people in the school community in those terms. Treating staff as friends, like treating parents or boys as friends, always ended badly. How ironic that he was liked by them all, because he befriended nobody. Yet he knew that was how they felt. Mrs Philpot made sure he knew everything. She loved to keep him informed. First thing each morning, between her diary run-through and the list of phone calls and emails, she always slipped in her snippets – what she euphemistically described as 'feedback'.

'Just to give you a temperature reading …' she'd start. In spite of himself, he'd come to see some value in her gossip and he'd learnt to consciously presume it needed dilution.

He watched Grace watching him from across his desk. Was she reading his thoughts? Was she wondering what he had heard already? About his friendship with Jake – that her late husband was one of the few who really was a friend? And now this. Jake was a friend right

up until he died. Probably the only staff member he allowed himself to consider in those terms. The truest, oldest kind. A friend from long before he was Headmaster. Would their friendship have become stilted too, in the name of professionalism and impartiality, if he was still alive? Would he have distanced himself from that good man too? What price did this job demand? The second paper clip broke in two in his fingers. He tossed the pieces at the bin. Missed again. He made a mental note to reposition the bin once this meeting was over.

She walked over to the bin and picked up the little snarls of twisted wire with one hand and dropped them into the palm of the other. She was careful not to miss any little bits caught up in the thick pile of the carpet. She dusted them off her hands into the bin. She moved it closer to his desk and gave him a weak smile.

'Grace, I can do that. Please don't …' She gestured for him to stop apologising.

'I don't mind, Mac. In fact I can't help myself,' she tried to smile. 'You know me – I have to tidy up a mess. Too many years of teaching scruffy boys does that, I guess.'

'So is that what you're doing here, tidying up a mess?' He hoped she could hear his empathy.

'Maybe. But at first I tried to ignore it, Mac. I think Holly tried even harder than me. We didn't rush at this. We even discussed sweeping it under the rug and letting the rumours drift away.' He knew this was true of her character. She would weigh up all the options and reason through each option carefully.

'Okay, so let me get this straight. Holly is alleging she was raped. Almost a week ago. The rapist was Duncan Chylde. The rape took place on campus. You want to lay criminal charges.'

'I'm finding your choice of words infuriating, Mac. I'm trying to remain professional here, but Holly isn't "alleging". I repeat, I don't *want* to lay charges, but yes, once we get past your unfortunate choice of diction, that's the gist of it.'

He ignored the sting in her response. She was entitled to that, if Holly's version was true, he supposed. And why wouldn't it be? He stopped his thoughts in their tracks – someone else would have to decide on that. His job was to allow due process, not judge. He felt tired as he considered how many years it had taken to realise that this was his job – nothing more, nothing less – in a time of crisis. How long had he sat behind that olive green leathered expanse of desk, beneath high ceilings and oil portraits of his expectant predecessors who stared at him from all sides, to realise this was all that was required?

His index finger was bleeding now, snagged by the rough edge of a third paper clip. He reached into his drawer for a tissue. How many tissue boxes had he nudged in the direction of sad parents, or remorseful teachers, or contrite boys behind his mask of professional indifference? How many mistakes had he made along the way, and in doing so changed the fate of young people? In their desperate moments, did they realise he wished he could weigh in, wished he could save them, take sides? Did any of these cowering souls who came to explain or unravel or plead or apologise, or cover up the mess left behind by careless acts of adolescence understand that his job was to facilitate no more or less than that due process?

'Grace, this is an enormous decision to lay a rape charge. For Holly. For you. He's the son of a school board member, you know? Don't you teach the boy? The media will climb in …'

'Mac, of course I've considered all of those factors – you know me. I've worked through all the implications!' She was angry now. 'But for Holly, she needs to go through with this. I think it's the only way she'll come out the other side of this hell in one piece. I need to stand by her side through this.' Her voice waivered. She looked away from him. He watched her profile as she looked out the window and made a quick swipe of her hand across her cheek.

'I'll resign if you want,' she said quietly.

'No, you won't. Absolutely not. That's not what I'm asking for. I presume it's not what you want either? Nobody will benefit from that. You're too good at what you do, Grace, don't be damned crazy! I won't accept your resignation – unless it's what you or Holly want? You've got a department reliant on you … less than two months left of this year to get some really bright students to finish matric. Not to mention the other junior classes. Please, Grace, no …'

'It's funny, Mac. Tragedies or crises make families talk. Eventually. There's so little unsaid between us now. I asked Holly if she wanted to leave here. I figured it might be the way to go. She thought about it. Then, d'you know what she said?' She didn't turn to look at him or wait for his reply. 'She talked about how hard she's tried to hate this place, with all its boys and her dad dying here, but she can't. It holds all her memories of him. It was so hard listening to my daughter explaining how she can't help loving it here, even though this place is not hers to love. She described herself as some freak trying to barge in on the boys' world. She described how she didn't understand their weird set of rules. But in spite of that it's still home for her.'

She turned to look at him then, but at the same time he felt invisible. She looked through him. He sensed she needed to talk to organise her thoughts. Perhaps to vent or purge her pain. He said nothing and waited for her to go on.

‘Ah Mac, I’ve been such an absent mother. I think I just buried myself in my work to get over Jake’s death. The twins are probably fine – well, I hope they are – they’ve got each other and a whole campus full of big boys they regard as brothers. But Holly, how did I let her slip away?’

‘Grace, you’re being too hard on yourself, it’s not your fault.’

‘No Mac, even before Jake died, I don’t know why, but he and Holly had this connection that I couldn’t quite … He made sure she felt prized and special and unique amongst all these boys. I think all I did was make her feel invisible.’ Grace stopped and looked out to the valley.

‘I’m rambling, Mac, sorry. I know you’re busy. But you get the idea. She’s thought hard about this, and leaving isn’t really the answer, so she has to confront it.’ Her voice faded off into uncertainty.

The wind was picking up and rattled the windows of his office. The shadows of the leaves and branches of an English plane tree danced across her face as they scratched the window pane. Her eyes shone through the dancing shadows.

‘Whew, Grace. You’ve got an old soul in that daughter of yours. She’s Jake’s girl alright. What about you? Why would you think about going?’ He was careful to keep his tone neutral.

‘I obviously don’t want to resign, but I know it may come to that. But if you don’t want that, well, that’s a relief. For now, anyway. Although I’ll understand if it comes to that after this debacle.’ She turned again to look at him, more composed now. She glanced at her watch. ‘Can we talk about the main issue? Where to from here?’

‘Well, I have a few difficulties,’ he gave a short, bitter snort. ‘No, I have many difficulties. But that’s my problem. Let’s put those aside for now and look at your issues. If you’re serious that this is the only way, you will have spoken to a lawyer, I presume?’

‘Yes, we know the procedure now. I must help Holly lay a criminal charge. It has nothing to do with the school or you. But I’m told I must inform you that we’re going to do this so that you consider your own disciplinary options. I think you need to wait for the outcome of the criminal trial – for a verdict. Will you suspend Duncan as an interim measure? I presume you’ll consider suspension pending the outcome of a school disciplinary enquiry?’

‘I don’t know what sanction we’ll consider. I’ll have to take it under advisement from the disciplinary committee. Anyway Grace, don’t you see, even if I knew what our sanction would be, the battle lines are now drawn, in a sense? I have to be very careful. I can’t really

tell you what we'll do.' She did not flinch and her eyes fixed on his. She was resolute, but did she understand the fight ahead of her?

'Grace, has the lawyer explained to you how brutal a criminal trial will be for Holly? Standing there in the witness box, alone? I don't know much about criminal trials. But a rape charge is going to get messy. You don't have to answer this, but I have to ask for your sake. Are there any witnesses?' She interrupted to answer quickly, despite his cautioning her against it.

'No Mac, no witnesses. Holly's word against his. And of course a doctor's report and a psychologist's report. But they'll find ways to explain away that professional testimony with their own experts, I'm sure.'

He huffed a sigh, slumped back in his chair and sank into one of his silences. She continued to stand still and resolute, refusing to break her steady stare.

His thoughts drifted to a disciplinary incident of many years ago. A case that had bothered him just like this one did. Perhaps a similar approach could be considered? He recalled the facts so vividly. A bursary boy that stole a laptop from another boy. Those parents were determined to lay criminal charges. There was hard evidence against the thief. Yet, at his own recommendation to the school board and the angry parents, as Headmaster, he had managed to convince them that justice would be as effectively served with an internal disciplinary enquiry, and that a conviction would ruin the life of a bright boy who needed to learn a lesson another way. The complainant family agreed, and the internal disciplinary ran its course. The bursary boy was found guilty, and the chairman of the disciplinary hearing sentenced him to twenty hours of community service working in a juvenile detention centre, and he was placed on final warning for a year. That boy ended up as a prefect. He wondered what had become of the boy now. It had seemed that he was going to turn out fine. The furious parents of the other boy crowed righteously about their forgiveness, and everyone was happy in the end. Could an innovative approach to this matter serve Holly and the Chylde boy too?

But rape? That was a whole different story. Or maybe not. He had seen enough teenagers up against the criminal justice system to be cynical, no matter what the facts of the case were.

He chose his words carefully, proceeding slowly as if to gauge her temperature as he went along.

'Please believe me, I am not defending the school's agenda when I say this, Grace, but you are taking on one hell of a fight. Are you sure you're up for this? It's just you and your daughter. Holly is what, seventeen?' He tried to push aside thoughts of a media circus, angry

board members, the Old Boys committee, parents, staff, boys. The crowds of speculators and ill-informed speculations gnawed inwards from the edge of his mind, like worms.

'Yes, she's seventeen, only just. Young for her year. How grotesque that I find myself thinking how much easier it would be if she was fifteen – then it would be statutory rape. Case closed.' She got up and began pacing across his office. He knew this meant she was considering her options. Up and down, up and down in front of him she walked as she talked. A busy mind inside a busy body.

'Do you have any idea what that feels like Mac? One day we're this little family, a family without a dad, but we're doing okay, getting along fine under the circumstances.' On she paced, watching the carpet as she stepped, and falling silent for a while. She was a pacer in her classroom too, especially when she was debating two alternative arguments with her classes. Her classroom door was always open. The other teachers in the English department would often tease her, 'Saw you doing laps today Grace – what was it, Hamlet's dilemma?'

'In large chunks it's thanks to you, Mac,' she continued. 'And this job and our home in this idyllic space we all live in.' As she spoke, her arms swept towards the scenes outside the windows, towards the immaculate lawns, the white buildings, the valley. 'I think Holly's right. It's all this that has ensured we've been sort of on track as a family.' Her arms dropped to her sides and she turned her back to him, continuing to pace, but slower now. She looked out the window. 'Better than we'd be anywhere else, that's for sure,' her voice trailed off. Her pacing stopped.

'Next thing, Holly – my beautiful, quirky, bright, brittle girl sits on the edge of her seat in my car looking like a small bird with a broken wing and she says to me, "Mum, I was raped".' Grace's voice rasped as she turned to him and stood still. 'Can you imagine that, Mac?' Her eyes shone, and he suspected that if she blinked, tears would brim onto her cheeks.

'Honestly, Grace? No I can't. I can't begin to imagine your pain. Holly's pain. Your anger. Your confusion. But I also can't see how this criminal charge will help you. Please trust me here. I'm concerned for you and for Holly if you do this. How will this fix anything? It'll likely make matters worse.'

'Worse than what, Mac? Worse than Holly feeling too embarrassed to leave her home because she's scared she'll pass a crowd of Hill House boys who all titter and whisper behind their hands as she passes?' She was pacing again. 'Too scared to go to St Agnes because she knows exactly what everyone there is not saying to her? But too proud to stay at home, because she knows her best shot at being vindicated is if she shows face? Too scared to stay

home alone with her own thoughts, yet too scared to leave the safety of her aloneness. How do I help a girl past that if she says she needs a trial?' Back and forth she paced on.

'Has she seen a psychologist? A rape counsellor?'

'Yes of course! I think they've helped her, a little. Although maybe that's my wishful thinking. They've helped me to help her too, I think. On the better days. But she wants this thing tried in court, Mac. She wants her version to be on record. She wants that boy to know what he's done. She wants her shame to go away.'

'And what if the shame doesn't go away? What if her version doesn't hold up?'

'We've talked about that. Angelica and I have both talked to her. We've warned her of that possibility. But she is resolute that the truth shall prevail.' She gave a short, bitter snort. 'Ha! I suppose that's what you get when you raise a daughter on a diet of fairytales. An idealist. She's always had faith in the underdog, in the truth – all that impossible stuff. In her more practical moments, when I dare to suggest the foolishness of taking on that family, she says she doesn't even care what the outcome is. She thinks that just by her taking the stand this boy will learn he can't do this to anyone again. Maybe she's right. No boy should be allowed to do this again.'

'Angelica is also in agreement?' She gave a vehement nod. 'I'm pleased she's helping you,' he said. 'I'd imagine she's a good person to have on your team in this sort of situation.' She blew a huff of air out through tight lips.

'The only good thing to come out of this mess, I suppose. My mother-in-law and I are talking and seem to be on the same side for once …' she trailed off.

He had never understood the dislike between mother- and daughter in-law that Jake had discussed with him once or twice. But it had been obvious to anyone who had spent time with them together. Jake had laughed and hinted that maybe it was sometimes what just happened between an adoring mother and a daughter-in-law who the mother never feels quite matches up to what she'd hoped for. He had a sense that since Jake's death nothing had thawed between them. Dear God, he knew and loved this family so much, and now this. How was he supposed to be impartial?

Grace seemed lost in her own thoughts as she leaned against the window frame and watched boys rushing along paths between lessons. She needed time to think this option through. Rushing her was a bad idea. He thought again about his friend's mother. Statuesque, stubborn Angelica. Another friend who he couldn't really call a friend anymore. Not that he had deliberately distanced her. When did he stop visiting her? There was a time when his diary reminded him to drop in on Tuesday evenings for a cup of tea with her to talk about his

student days with her son. He knew that his stories of their careless digs life together helped her to grieve. It was another creeping casualty of headmastership – time.

Grace continued her pacing. She talked, still without looking at him, more to herself than to him.

'Holly's not saying it, but I think part of this is that she needs to do this for Jake. She's got this thing about being brave for him. He always told her to "be brave". Even as he was dying, he would say it to her. "Be brave, Holly-hothead." My voice can't match her dead father's. I don't want it to, and I certainly don't want to undermine him or disagree with what she thinks he would say.' She had turned again to face him. She stood with her arms crossed. The tall north window of his office framed her. She was silhouetted against the green front lawns, the school bell tower behind her left shoulder and the edge of a Cape Dutch school building faded out the edge of the frame. The uninterrupted views over the valley fell away behind her right shoulder. She looked small against the backdrop of this institution and its history.

'Grace, what if Holly could be brave for her dad without a criminal trial? Would you consider her version being tried here on campus instead of in court? A school disciplinary hearing?'

She stopped with her back to him. There was a stillness that lasted several minutes. A Piet-My-Vrou called twice.

'I don't know. I didn't think that was possible. But why would you agree to that, Mac? You'd rather this mess is dealt with outside of your school – leave it to the lawyers and the judges out there to find a verdict, surely? Then all you have to do is react to that. If he's found guilty by the courts, your work is done, and off he goes. Neatly expelled and jailed, with a bit of luck, without you facing the wrath of Mr Chylde and his cronies. If not, he gets off, and his life goes on here as if he's done nothing, and you don't have to explain yourself to me or anyone else.'

'Yes, that would be the normal way. But maybe it's better that this stays in the school. Granted, it's potentially messy. It's also not my decision, and the board would have to sanction this. But this school doesn't need the media circus that will come with the school rugby captain facing a public rape trial. God knows it gets worse when I think about the accused being Charles Chylde's son – Chylde is a loose cannon in the media at the best of times. If you'd agree not to speak to the media or go public with this, it may turn out better for you and for Hill House. And for Holly.'

'I don't know, Mac. This isn't my field of expertise.'

‘Look, I would need to discuss the notion with the disciplinary committee and, especially given the fact that it’s a board member’s son, I’d need to clear it with the Chairman too. They may not even entertain the idea. So don’t muddy the waters by discussing it with Angelica or Holly yet. Don’t incur unnecessary costs of asking a lawyer’s opinion yet either. If I get permission to run with the disciplinary hearing first, I’ll come back to you. Then you can get legal advice and discuss it as a family. You will still have the right to say no and go straight for a criminal trial if you like. But if a disciplinary hearing is a first option, this may work for you too.’ He got up to signal their meeting was over. She looked at her watch.

‘I must go, Mac. I’ve got the Grade Nines and I need to rearrange my classroom into a courtroom. I’m getting in my own legal practice – they’re roleplaying the first day of the *To Kill a Mockingbird* trial,’ she managed a weak smile. She’s still one of the best, he thought.

‘I’ll come back to you as soon as I can,’ he said escorting her to the door and issuing her out. Mrs Philpot appeared to busy herself at her workstation outside his office. ‘Please take care of yourself and your Holly, Grace,’ he said quietly. He wanted to hug her and say he was sorry for this mess, but he was her Headmaster and she was his head of English, and they both knew that was more important than an old friendship right now. He watched her leave the building and pace across the quad. Then he turned to Mrs Philpot.

‘Please get the Chairman on the line for me, Mrs P,’ he said.

CHAPTER 15

RINA

I can make this better with a little bit of sorting

She received the call from the Headmaster telling her to collect their son.

'Interim suspension pending a hearing in the week ahead,' he said. 'There has been an allegation of rape,' he said. A curt phonecall, no gentle introduction. He called Duncan 'your son', not using his name, and he called her 'Mrs Chylde', which irritated her, because he had always called her Rina at those dull school board functions that Charles always insisted she attend with him. She called him Big Mac at those functions, like everybody did. But she found herself calling him Mr Macdonald in response to his Mrs Chylde. She wondered if he really had tried to contact Charles first before phoning her, as he had said. If she were a Headmaster bringing bad tidings, she certainly wouldn't choose Charles as a first port of call. He probably fudged that one. Anyway, there was no discussion, no detail. When she tried to press for more information, Big Mac continued.

'Mrs Chylde, I am sure your son will relay his version to you soon enough. At present what is important for you to know is that he is suspended. I would suggest your priority right now is to make plans to remove him from the school grounds immediately. He has been told he is not to speak to any other boys in the meantime and he is not to attend class. Please respect the fact that I have instructions from the Chairman of the Board that all communication from now on must be in writing. Once you have made Duncan's travel arrangements, please email my secretary, Mrs Philpot, with the details. We will also advise you by email of the hearing date and other information as soon as possible. I am certain that you understand we need this matter to be handled swiftly, in the interests of both Duncan and Hol … the complainant, who both have their matric to write. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting to attend.' And that was that.

Of course she phoned Charles on his cell immediately. Got no reply, as usual. Then phoned his office line, and got Glenda the Gatekeeper. She was used to having to make up some excuse to get permission to be put through to her husband. She hated herself for the variety of excuses and lies she'd made in the past to get past her – so humiliating that she allowed herself to be intimidated in this way. She presumed her insistent tone meant business when she was put through immediately after she said, 'Hi Glenda, I need to discuss an urgent matter with Charles. It's private, so don't ask. Extremely urgent. It won't take long, but I need to speak to him right now'.

She repeated the Headmaster's words to him as best as she could recall them. There was no response from Charles's end, just loud nasal breathing. He took in the facts in silence. The few facts she knew anyway.

'What else did Big Mac say?' he asked when she had finished. 'What did he say? What else? He must have said something else?' He didn't speculate, he didn't ask her for her thoughts. 'I'll call you back,' he said. But of course he didn't. And she sat and waited by the phone and paced the house and gave it half an hour. Then she tried to call him back. Glenda blocked her this time with her usual excuses, and of course, his cell phone was off. She tried Duncan. His phone was off too. She thought of driving to Charles's office in Hyde Park – only five minutes away and easy enough to do, but she imagined Glenda's smarmy pleasantries on her arrival that thinly disguised her disdain for the boss's wife. She knew what Glenda thought of her – a stupid housewife who was too busy going to gym and meeting friends for coffee to do her own admin. It sat in the subtext of Glenda's replies to her emails requesting bookings for family holidays, or asking for medical aid claims to be submitted. She couldn't stand the thought of them both pretending they didn't hate each other. If she drove there and pushed her way into his office because she couldn't get him on the phone, it was all the proof Glenda would need to know she had won that round. No, she was not going to rush round to his office in a panic and make a fool of herself there, desperate as she was to understand what had happened.

So instead, she busied herself with those tasks she'd been putting off. There was an oily stain on the wooden side-counter that Gladys hadn't managed to get rid of. She'd said she was nervous to take to it with any chemicals that would strip the varnish or bleach the wood. To hell with that, stripped or bleached was better than stained – she took to the mark with a pot scourer. She began by rubbing in the direction of the grain – no difference. She rubbed the opposite way and the stain began to lift, along with the varnish. A pale patch of dull, bald wood appeared. It was clean and grainy. Perfect and alluring, not varnished over and concealed like the rest of the counter. Charles would be furious, he liked polished surfaces. She found a large fruit bowl and placed it over the unvarnished patch and packed it with fruit from the fridge. The whole counter would be so beautiful stripped of its varnish and raw. She'd save that décor suggestion for another day when things were calmer.

She moved to the scullery and began to clear old food from the freezer and sorted what was still worth saving into four categories. She labelled the drawers – Dairy, Meat, Veg, Other, in permanent marker. The annoying thing was that too many things fell into the Other category, so that drawer became too full. The Dairy drawer was almost empty. And she

agonised over whether a frozen lamb and lentil soup should be categorized as Meat or Other and settled on Meat and made peace with the logic of her decision, because the Other drawer was too full. Her hands burned pink from the stacking and sorting of frozen lumps of food and, as she created order out of chaos, she began to breathe slowly again. But still the phone did not ring. She thought about calling a friend to talk about it. Perhaps she would find moral support from Moira, whose son Liam had been suspended last year for being in possession of dagga. But then she thought better of it – after all they'd never managed to pin anything on Liam and it had become something nobody spoke about in the Glass family. A non-happening. She ran through a list of other possible friends to phone, but a doubt appeared next to each possibility. An imaginary rolodex of friends flipped through her thoughts as she went to the bins in the back yard and checked that the recycling was properly ordered. Plastics with plastics. Tins with tins. Newspapers and cardboards together. There were always those irritating scraps of TetraPak that didn't quite justify a whole bin to themselves. Yes, it was time to call that removal chap to take this all off to the recycling depot. All part of good citizenship. What was his name again? Oh and she must remember to warn the gate guard to let the rubbish removal guy in. Scruffy looking chap – the guard would presume he wasn't welcome – unless he was given advance warning. The tedium of these domestic chores was just what she needed to numb her thoughts to the questions that kept nagging at her about her youngest son, the one who the big brothers called, The Prince, and about what he had done.

When Charles drove up the driveway from work that evening, she saw from the kitchen window that Duncan was in the passenger seat. He must have instructed Glenda to get him on the next flight out of Pietermaritzburg. She didn't expect to see him so soon and she presumed the shock of it was what made her cry as they walked through the front door together. He looked so smart in his rugby colours blazer, so handsome and mature in that tie. Would he wear that uniform again? What had he done? She hugged her son and they held onto one another for a moment. She thought his eyes seemed to say, 'I'm sorry,' but no words passed between them. Then he went up to his bedroom in silence and Charles gave her a look that said she was pathetic, but said nothing to her. As soon as he was out of earshot, she turned to Charles.

'And so now what? What is going on, Charles?'

'Not now, Rina. Honestly, do we have to talk about it now?' he growled and headed down the passage to his study. He slammed the door behind him. All those years of marriage had

taught her not to try get him to talk when he wasn't ready to. She crept upstairs to Duncan's room and knocked on the door.

'Ja?' he barked.

'Dodge? Can I come in?' She opened the door, not waiting for his reply. She usually called him Duncan or Dunk, but it felt right to call him the name his mates and his dad used. Perhaps this would allow her to access his thoughts? He was lying on his bed, staring at the screen of his iPhone.

'Are you busy? Can we talk?'

'Ma, seriously? Does it have to be now?'

'Well, I just want to help, Dodge. I can't help if I don't know what's going on.'

'You don't need to know, Ma. Dad says it's better I don't talk to anyone. Just him and the lawyer. He says he's got it covered.' There was no malice in his words. In fact she thought she detected a hint of apology beneath his resignation.

'Okay,' she said, when what she wanted to say was, 'Why, Dodge? Is it true? I raised you better than that, didn't I?' and she shut the door and walked softly down the passage to her bathroom. She pushed her shoulders back and lifted her head as she glimpsed at herself and passed the mirror.

She got into the shower and turned the taps on full and hot. She made sure her sobs weren't louder than the sound of the water. She scrubbed herself clean, rubbed herself dry, dressed for dinner and went downstairs. In the kitchen, as she busied herself with supper preparation and laying the table, she heard muffled sounds of deep voices from the study. They must be in there planning their defense. She knew this was a world where she was not welcome. After all, what could she know about such things? All she'd been for the last twenty years was a mother, and what she was before that was so long ago it didn't count. God knows there are enough lapsed lawyers with ill-informed views – there was no use for a washed up ex-conveyancer's views in a disciplinary dispute.

At supper they sat together and ate, and pretended they weren't listening to one another chew. Charles and Duncan absorbed themselves with the business of filling their stomachs. They went about the business of combining the food with a fork. The separate neat piles of bobotie and rice were dexterously mixed up with one hand, then shovelled into their mouths. Charles slugged on his wine between mouthfuls, while Duncan washed his food down with a long glass of milk. How could her boy who still drank milk with his supper be guilty of rape? The food made little parcels in the sides of his cheeks, like a chipmunk, and in spite of her misery, she felt a bizarre temptation to laugh out loud. She stifled the thought and, as neither

of them looked up, neither of them caught her smile before it disappeared. She seemed to be the only one who struggled in that silence. Were they hoping if they pretended there wasn't a problem for long enough, it would go away? One thing she knew for sure was that there was no point in trying to get a response from Charles or Duncan when they had decided there was nothing to discuss.

After supper they both got up from the table and disappeared into the garden, leaving her to clear away the dishes. She stacked the dishwasher and returned to the dining room to pack away the placemats. She looked out the window onto the floodlit garden. She watched Charles go about his evening ritual of fiddling with the pool filter and catching leaves off the surface with a net. Making it perfect. She thought of how she had learned those habits from him. Perfection wasn't her thing, once upon a time, but he had explained to her countless times that the devil was in the detail. She watched her son watching him, as if he had so much to learn. He looked puzzled, as if he was beginning to realise for the first time that the science of pool perfection was not mastered in an instant.

She turned off the dining room light and stood, observing the outline of the top of Charles's head sticking out from behind the pool filter cover. A plume of cigarette smoke rose out of the silhouette in a straight line. Like a chimney. The Kreepy Krauly snarled and sucked at air from the pool's top step. At the sound, he slammed the filter cover closed, his head popped up and he eyed it. Still and predatory, observing a wounded animal in a trap. Then he stalked up to it as it gagged and quivered against the wall. He yanked at its hose and it dragged itself back to the depths of the pool. He dusted off his hands and turned to Duncan, who all the while had been standing behind him and speaking to his back in tones that were soft and pleading with inaudible words.

She returned to the scullery and practiced to herself in silence. She thought about things she wanted to say to Charles as she set the dishwasher and started it. She went to her desk and stared at her laptop screen. She wrote thoughts onto a blank page in Word.

'I love him as much as you do. He needs to understand consequences. I'm not saying he did it or he didn't. He won't talk to me. You won't talk to me. So I can't tell. We know he's not a bad kid, don't we? But he can be thoughtless. He's entitled. We made him that, so it's our fault too. We all are. Entitled. Every parent would find the best defense they can, but we can't make up lies can we?'

She stopped typing and re-read what she had written. She heard them come from the garden onto the patio and she hit backspace until the words disappeared. She took herself up to bed alone and, as she drew the curtains, she watched her husband and her son talk in

hushed tones beneath her window. Charles patted Duncan on the shoulder as they spoke. She wondered, not for the first time, what she had done wrong and why she was never quite a member of the gang that was her husband and her three sons. As she turned off the light, she heard the sounds of sport commentary come onto the TV. She pulled the pillow over her head, but still she heard them shouting.

'For fucksakes, ref! What's that about?' yelled Charles.

'Jesus, pass the ball, you prick,' countered Duncan's voice, almost indistinguishable in tone from his father's.

She woke later to hear him snarling into his phone. What time was it? Something past eleven said the luminous hands on her bedside clock. His voice drifted up from the verandah.

'Sure, he had sex with her. But he's seventeen years old, a bright future … He's been offered a rugby scholarship in the States you know, Baz. Yep, we want all our kids outta here, who wouldn't if they can afford it – there's no future for them here, pale males. So I say, what is it about the need to blame? How does laying on guilt help? It's done. Over. Move on.' He fell silent for a patch. She tried to imagine Baz's response. She'd never met him. But she knew he was a smart lawyer, and tough and willing to take calls at all times of night. He had been part of Charles's team for over ten years – that was proof enough that he knew what he was doing.

Charles spoke again.

'Of course the girl knew him well enough. Sounds like she knows most boys, "well enough", from what I hear … So she goes wandering off with him alone – ten days ago I might add – smelling of perfume, cute shorts … all the tricks you know ... late at night.' Then silence again. The occasional 'Ja. Ja. Ja," as Baz gave his advice.

'But Baz, buddy, there has to be something in the fact that she took so long to lay the charge. My boy says he reckons she was hoping this would turn into a big romance. Only once she realised he had no plans for that did she cry foul! Don't tell me she didn't have her eye on the prize, right Baz? Some teacher's kid dazzled by a wealthy Hill House boy from Jo'burg, surely? Why didn't I warn my son, huh Baz? Runs in the family it seems, us Chyldes know how to pick them. Can we build an argument around that?' His words floated off.

She fumbled in her bedside drawer for a sleeping tablet, pulled the pillow back over her head, and waited for it to do its trick. The next morning she found Charles sitting at the breakfast table with his iPad out. She was about to speak. He didn't look up.

'We haven't compared diaries for a while,' he said.

‘But what about Duncan?’ she asked.

‘Still sleeping. Give him a chance to rest, he’s been through a lot,’ said Charles. This was his cue to her that last night’s impasse, or whatever it was, needed to be overlooked as if it had never happened. Just like the accusation against Duncan, and his suspension, and countless other messes they were becoming so adept at ignoring. Like dog turds – so much easier not to see, step over, and leave for someone else to clean up. So their monthly ritual of syncing diaries proceeded, and she reminded herself it was as much a balancing act for her as it was for him. She knew too well that an upset like this latest drama of Duncan’s was all that was needed to make their matrimonial seesaw teeter. So she told him of her book club meetings and charity drives. He notified her of his golf tours and fishing trips, and they captured the dates. Unwritten rule: don’t object. Just diarise and keep track of one another’s commitments. Oh, and make sure to plan a few things together too, of course.

‘7th to 11th May is the Groggers Golf Tour to the Wild Coast,’ he poked blunt fingers at the screen. His eyes and his mouth looked wrung out and shrunken.

‘But that’s our 25th wedding anniversary.’

‘Oh right. But this tour clashes every year. We’ve never fussed much about those things, right? I know it’s a pity. But you understand? There are rules to this tournament – if I pull out of the golf, it’s dead man’s shoes and I lose my slot. We can go out to dinner the next night when I get back, or celebrate some other time. It won’t make much of a difference.’

She was about to concede, as usual. She began searching for another suitable date and flicked through dates on either side of the anniversary. All full up with celebrations and corporate functions and parties of people she hardly knew.

A vision of Duncan as an adult floated through her thoughts and she looked at this future man. The colours blazer was gone, and the buff rugby body had become lumpy. She watched her twenty-years-hence son talk to a wife in clipped aggressive sentences. She couldn’t make out the wife, and when she searched for a sense of pride in her boy, she found none of that either. She thought about her two elder sons who had disappeared overseas to live there without a backward glance in her direction. She thought of the hardly-ever phonecalls that told her lots about what they earned, and nothing about who they’d become. She knew she wanted something different from this last-born son. Perhaps it was unfair to foist her lobotomised ambitions onto this boy for whom, like the others, she had given up her career. But then, in a dark corner in the back of her soul, she thought perhaps that she recognised a shadow of a woman who devoted her entire adult life to her family for good reasons once upon a time. She reminded herself that at a time when she had a choice, she once chose to

make her work that of raising the boys, because she believed that if she threw herself wholeheartedly into this they would stand for something worthwhile. Now it was obvious that if this was what she still wanted, she needed to stand for something too.

She realised that she had known for a long time that the day would come. But she had expected it in a Jerry Springer Show sort-of way. Instead it was a simple winding down of a clock. No yelling or flinging of vases – not that there hadn't been histrionics in the past. But in that moment minimal effort to state a simple fact was all that was left. She knew she would be accused of bad timing, but finally she felt ready to defend her choice. She suspected that Charles only needed her to utter the simple words that neither of them had been brave enough to say out loud, but that had hovered as a shadow for years behind last words at night, first utterances in the morning. and in their post-coital sadness.

'We need to be divorced,' she said.

CHAPTER 16

GRACE

Sticks and stones

She rubbed the words off her whiteboard: ‘What’s in a name?’ She had left the words there for a while as a deliberate reminder to her class. Who would have guessed that a short while ago Duncan had sat in her classroom with his peers being asked to list all the nicknames that girls are given by boys? They’d come up with Bird, Chick, Honey, Sweetie, Sugar, Baby ... The lesson had accidentally diverted onto this topic, and she had allowed the departure from the curriculum because the syllabus was almost finished. She was secretly delighted at the chance to conscientise these boys. But now it felt like a lifetime ago since she’d been delusional enough to think she’d got through to them. Now she wondered if any of them got her point when she’d said, ‘Not exactly labels that are going to bring that glass ceiling crashing down’. And of course there were other names used by boys for girls too. Maybe she should have gone further? How optimistic she’d felt that she had got the point across.

‘All names, not just girly ones, leave a sort of fingerprint,’ she’d said. ‘That name is there forever. It leaves an impression that won’t change and can never be rubbed out. Here’s a thought: Do you agree with Shakespeare’s words, “a rose by any other name smells just as sweet”? Good essay topic actually …’ They looked at her, bemused.

She polished the board to a smooth white. Maybe, if nothing else, if her students got part of it, they’d stop using those stupid boy-names? Mind you, that lot didn’t have a glass ceiling to crack so they could call each other whatever they liked.

Dodge. What a stupid nickname. She hated those boarding school names boys gave each other. She liked biblical names. Duncan was a strong name. Then that got corrupted into Dodge, presumably because he had a famous side-step on the rugby field. Was it more than that? Was he famous for being dodgy in other parts of his life? She hated it even more when those names stuck and you got grown men walking around with little boy nicknames. What was that? A big fat old man running around still being called Tiny. Even though when he got given the name it wasn’t meant to be ironic. Can’t he see he’s outgrown his name? Dodge will probably be like that. He’ll still be Dodge when he’s shuffling around and leaning on a walking frame, incapable of dodging a thing, and he’ll still think his name is cool because of some ancient private in-joke. He won’t even think about the other implications of that ridiculous nickname.

The words “feminism”, “misogyny” and “patriarchy” disappeared under her eraser. Another word that needs a replacement – feminism. It had lost its heft. Not many people called themselves that these days without feeling the need to defend themselves. It was like a swear word, like the F word. It was an angry word that had achieved too little in recent history. They needed a new word that made girls feel safe and didn’t make boys mad. Holly needed a word that still let her feel like a whole girl.

She thought about her challenge to the boys the day she wrote these words.

‘So, I won’t be mean and give you an essay, but my challenge to you boys as you go out into the world is to think like feminists. Not just in your deeds, but in your words. How do words and names work differently for boys and girls?’ He was bright and a good participant in class.

‘We disempower girls by giving them pathetic names, Ms W,’ Duncan had said.

‘Agreed,’ she’d said as she turned and wrote the word “DISEMPOWER” on the board.

‘But you can only feel disempowered if you allow yourself to feel that way,’ he continued.

‘Yes, Ms W, that’s true,’ said Buhle. ‘It’s like we use the word “Nigga” and it’s cool. It’s hip nowadays for black dudes to call each other Nigga.’

‘That may be so, Buhle. You make a good point. But how would you feel if a white guy called you Nigga?’

‘No, Ms W, it’s only a word the brothers can use for each other,’ Buhle trailed off.

‘Okay, so boys, what are we saying?’

‘We’re saying you can call yourself what you like, but you don’t get to choose what others call you,’ said Bruce.

She wondered how he felt about being nicknamed Scratcher. School policy dictated that teachers only called them by their real names, for obvious reasons. But all the teachers knew the boys’ nicknames. They also got wind of the names they themselves were given, but she wasn’t that naïve as to presume that Weaver Bird was her only nickname. Teaching boys makes one impervious. She’d heard mutterings of some of them.

‘What about calling someone a Ranga, Ms W?’

‘What about it, Craig?’ she asked.

‘Well, if you call someone Ranga, or Ginga, or Bloodnut or …’

‘Firebox,’ chipped in Simon from the back of the classroom. The boys tittered and Bruce elbowed Duncan, who blushed. She chose to ignore the sleazy remark. One of those teaching moments that she should perhaps have handled differently, with hindsight. Would it have made a difference? She realised now that she had missed the specificity of the tussle between

Duncan and Bruce – their little in-joke about her daughter. She hadn't even realised there was any romantic interest between Holly and Duncan at all. How much else about Holly had she missed?

She put the eraser down on the shelf below the board and her thoughts returned to the present. She sat at her desk with her head in her hands and thought about Holly's name. Hollyberry was Jake's name for her. Holly, for being born on Christmas day. Holly, for being a redhead. They had taught her to own the redhead nicknames, like the black boys had taught themselves to own "Nigga". What good had that done?

Slut-shamed. Now that was a good word. A new word that she knew – hell did she know – would hit the target. It was bang on. Holly told her about the words being used for her on various social media. She muttered the words into her empty classroom. Her voice grew as she tried each one out.

'Slut. Sleuuut. Whore. Hooooaaaar. Slag. Slaaaaaag.'

"Only a boy could have made up that stupid rhyme about sticks and stones. And words,' Holly had said to her. 'Mum, I'd take sticks and stones, any day.'

Too many girls knew all about the harm words cause. Her brittle daughter would trade the stuff that had been said about her for physical torture. What a horrid irony – if she'd been raped more violently the words may have been less brutal.

She packed up her desk, folded her pile of marking into her basket and made her way out of her classroom and down the road to home. She knew Holly needed to defend her name and that she would be at her side for it. She needed to own her beautiful Hollyberry name.

CHAPTER 17

BRITTANY

Keep the children happy

She was supposed to be flattered. The head of the dispute resolution department called her in, told her he was impressed with her recent efforts, and gave her the this-is-your-big-break speech before he laid out the details of the new matter. As he set out the facts she gathered the essentials – a disciplinary enquiry into a schoolboy, an elite school in KZN, an alleged rape. Her questions formed faster than he could lay them out.

As the details unfolded, the idea that she was their best and brightest shrank away. She wasn't that naïve. If she'd learnt nothing else in her three years there, she knew that lucky breaks for young associates were always for strategic reasons that served the partnership. She was careful though to make the right appreciative noises and nod as she scribbled notes and took in the information. Barry Lynch said they knew she had gone to school in those parts, so it was a nice opportunity for her to 'revisit her roots' and perhaps see her family down there. But as he said it he looked embarrassed at underpinning the brief with such sentimentalities, as if he had read her mind. What they wanted from her had more to do with the fact that she was young and female, than her ability or anything else. It was obvious it would look so much better for the defendant to have someone like her defending an alleged rapist, than some grey-suited middle-aged man. Besides, the grey-suited men had bigger fish to fry, and this was going to be messy work. She told herself it was still an opportunity to prove herself. She brushed aside her unease as he rapid-fired details. She knew the protocols at Waterstones – there would be partners watching closely from the sidelines while she was the one getting her hands dirty.

'But why are we taking on a criminal matter? It's not our area of expertise,' she asked.

'Well, Chylde's an important client. Vital in fact. It's his son who's in the mess. We can't risk him taking his work elsewhere. Besides, it's not a criminal matter, as such. It's a school disciplinary hearing. So that's also why you're the lead on this one – your labour experience will help you.'

'Sorry Mr Lynch, I'm confused. Rape – a criminal matter – being considered in a school disciplinary enquiry?'

'I'll get to that. But first, you know Charles Chylde, don't you? The son, Duncan, is a schoolboy at Hill House. He claims it was consensual. My assessment is that it's a simple

dispute of that fact. You're going to need to meet him today to help him with his statement and preparation.'

'Did she have a medical examination after the incident?'

'No. Good question, and one I'm sure you'll be putting to her.'

'So we're going to allege her failure to have a medical exam suggests she had something to hide?'

'For sure. Well, not so much something to hide – you need a delicate touch on this. It's more that she cooked up the rape claim a few days later so she didn't even think of a medical until it was too late.'

'Any witnesses to support her version?'

'None. So it shouldn't be too difficult. We may need some other witnesses to support our version. I gather there may be buddies he bragged to who'll support his account. But in the end it's going to come down to how well his version compares to hers.'

'I'm missing something. Why isn't she laying a criminal charge if she's alleging rape?'

'Another good question, and I'll come to that. Let's consider the school's options first. I'm sure you understand that a school, like any organisation, doesn't want to deal with the messy business of deciding on the guilt of a pupil.'

'So why would a good school do the criminal courts' dirty work?'

'Slow down Britt. Think about why. Remember that both the complainant and the defendant are about to write matric. They haven't got long to go at school.'

'Oh, okay, so it's about time, and a criminal trial takes too long, right?'

'Probably, and any institution likes decisive, swift action on these things. Also, of course the school, I hear from Mr Chylde, is hoping to keep the whole thing out of the media, for obvious reasons. This sort of stuff is damaging to a school's brand.'

'How does Mr Chylde know all this?'

'Here's where it gets a bit messy. He's donated money to the school for years. He's also a member of the school board. So let's presume he has – how shall I put it – the Headmaster's ear.'

'Okay, so I understand why the school may want the disciplinary hearing, risks and all. But I still don't get why on earth the girl would go for this rather than a criminal rape trial?'

'My assessment? It's a small community down there. Everyone is loving the drama of it. Jumping on the bandwagon. The girl is the daughter of a senior teacher at Hill House College. In fact her father was also a senior teacher – he died a few years ago. I guess there are lots of reasons to try and keep this out of the public eye and keep the whole thing in-

house, quiet. Can you imagine? The girl must be anxious about rising speculation in the community, writing matric, a public hearing that will attract media. This arrangement is a gift to her. It seems the school is happy to go along with this because the girl's reputation is a mess now, and she's one of them, in a sense. And of course, remember, they're trying to protect their school, so it serves both purposes at the same time.'

'So the girl wants a disciplinary hearing instead of a criminal trial?'

'Sounds like it. She's this kid who lives on the school campus with her teacher-mother, out of her depth amongst a bunch of silver-spoon boys at an all-boys boarding school. No father. Sounds to me like the girl could be a bit of a rescue puppy.' She winced at the label. Her own father had died when she was a child.

She thought about what her gran would say if she rocked up at her door with a big bunch of flowers and a bottle of Chanel No 5. No warning phonecall, just pitching up in 'Maritzburg and spending a night with her during the hearing. Mind you, cases like this made her want to quit and head down there for good. She thought about the salary – nice to be able spoil Gran. No decent legal associate salaries down in the Midlands, that's for sure.

'Wait. So the Headmaster is trying to protect his brand, he's trying to protect one of his teachers and her daughter, and he's trying to keep Mr Chylde happy, and so is going easy on the rapist son?'

'Slow down there with the rapist son bit,' he frowned at her over the top of his reading glasses. 'When you're tempted to call him a rapist or get judgemental, it may help to remember he's our big client's son, even if he can't keep his dick in his pants.'

She had heard of Chylde from one of the associates in the property division, but never met him herself. Now that dicks in pants were being mentioned, she remembered that, from what Elsa said, this was a family affliction.

'Sorry, Mr Lynch. I'm not suggesting he ... Can I go back to where we were? It sounds to me like the Headmaster is wearing a few too many hats?'

'Couldn't agree more. But that's not sinister. He could be a perfectly decent guy just trying to do his job. In fact he's well regarded generally, from what I hear. I wouldn't be a headmaster of a private school for all the money in the world. They're always wearing too many hats. I'm a school board member myself, so I see it every meeting – parents, staff, boys, board. Anyway, I digress. The many hats isn't our problem. Or at least it doesn't have to be. Our job is now to protect the boy, in whatever forum, and to insist on a few ground rules to ensure we can do that. Chylde is loyal to Hill House College, so we don't want to

rubbish the school in the process. Our job is simply to provide our client with the best possible defence.'

'Okay, but if our client's not guilty and there are all these damaging rumours flying around, surely we want the boy's name cleared? Why would we gamble on a school disciplinary hearing?'

'It's not our job to decide whether he's guilty or not guilty, Brittany. Our job is to defend him the best we can, and to keep the Chyldes happy.' She thought of "keep the children happy", but decided not to say it. Old Baz Lynch preferred his own jokes to anyone else's.

'My guess is we've got a much better shot at this in a school disciplinary enquiry with some tame Chairman than we have in court. You're experienced enough to know that judge allocations are a dangerous lottery these days, even in Jo'burg. I hate to think what even the best judges are like down in that hole. Pietermaritzburg – dear God, why would anyone with a brain want to live there?'

Again she shook off the feeling that she was being insulted. That was her hometown. She often thought of quitting this job and this gritty city and returning to her family. Now she felt parochial even thinking this way. She was careful not to look up and betray her dismay as she spoke.

'It still sounds weird to me. If he's guilty, and presumably this girl believes he is, why don't they want to nail him?'

'Believe me, if he's found guilty in the disciplinary, he's nailed. He's a rugby superstar with a scholarship waiting for him in some American Ivy League university. That'll disappear if he's guilty, whether it's in a school hearing, a criminal court, wherever. My guess is that she's looking for vindication because she's embarrassed, that's all. A school disciplinary will do that if he's found guilty, believe me. You've got your work cut out for you proving his innocence in the school system. Be grateful that's all it is.'

'But forgive me, Mr Lynch, if he's a rapist, he should go to jail.'

'Who's saying he's a rapist? He's a boy, a testosterone-filled kid who shagged the wrong girl. She cried foul. Our job is to prove that. Nothing more, nothing less. If you don't want to take on this work, just say so. There are other associates who would.'

'Sorry Mr Lynch, I think you've misunderstood me. I'm just getting to grips with the, well, choices. The disciplinary rather than a trial – so weirdly tactical? Sorry, I'm not resistant. Just puzzled. I won't disappoint.'

'Good. I'm counting on that. Now remember there are all sorts of rules of engagement that have been negotiated alongside the agreement to have a school disciplinary. That's been quite

a process. No family present at the hearing. A few other important details. Familiarise yourself with them. But in truth, the school can't stop them from pressing criminal charges if they want to afterwards.'

'Why would they want to afterwards?'

'Well, if he's not guilty in the disciplinary, they may want another run at the jump. Unlikely, but surely you know this stuff, my dear? Nobody can be denied their right to criminal justice. You do know this stuff – you tell me why?' She knew it, but it didn't quite make sense.

'I suppose in the school disciplinary the onus of proof is so much lighter? In a criminal matter it's beyond reasonable doubt. Civil, it's a balance of probability.'

'Exactly. They're trying to find a soft option and an easy way to vindicate the girl without putting her through her paces. I don't need to remind you that in the hearing you'll need to imply that this is exactly what they've done, and we suspect the reason for this is because they can't prove their case under the heavier burden.'

'Right,' she scribbled down his words, hoping she'd make sense of them later.

'But you need to tread a fine line: If Chylde gets off and emerges unscathed, they could cry foul. You need to make it clear that the school agreed to this, not us, and we're simply going with the forum they chose, right? The girl could argue she was offered this as an olive branch, but that it's actually to preserve the school's reputation. Don't let that confuse matters.'

'I'm a bit unsure how to walk that line, Mr Lynch. Any advice?'

'Well, for a start, you need to emphasise that the person who gains most from the school disciplinary is her. Nobody else. It's important. So you need to think past the disciplinary as well. You need to make sure they are not tempted to give this thing a second shot, another try in the criminal courts.'

'I'm not sure I get you?'

'The girl needs to be left in no doubt that she'll fail to prove rape in any forum. What I'm saying is, don't make it easy for her. No concessions. She needs to understand that if it's tough in a closed forum, it'll be even worse in a criminal trial. Perhaps you need to ask a few questions as to why she opted for the school disciplinary?'

'Okay, thanks. I'll go over your file notes and schedule to meet with Duncan Chylde as soon as possible.'

‘Oh, and another thing. In getting the parties to agree to a disciplinary hearing rather than a criminal trial, remember all parties have given their assurance that there will be no engagement with the media. That’s in everybody's interests.’

CHAPTER 18

TIM

A strange stranger

Tim opened up the office as the light came through the window. A good sign – if he could time it that the shafts of sunlight struck his desk as he sat down in the morning, it meant it was going to be a good day. A silly old superstition, but it had worked its magic for years.

He never packed his bag the night before a trial. Another of his rituals. He made sure everything he needed was laid out on his desk and ready the day before. The tools of his trade. But the final methodical sorting of documents and notes, and slipping them into his bag, was best done early on the morning of a matter. Sure, it was another superstition, but it had its own logic – it sorted his strategy, one last time, before going into battle.

Mind you, battle probably wasn't the right word anymore. He was more inclined to settle matters these days. He saw no need for protracted litigation that cost everyone too much. He prided himself on that – speedy resolution. No point in prolonging the agony with acrimony. Pity more of the young bucks didn't see it that way these days.

Particularly today he wanted speedy resolution. That poor girl. He didn't particularly want to take on the matter in the beginning. Not typically his area of expertise. But a friendship with the family going that far back can't be swept aside easily. What was it, fifty years of friendship? He'd known her late grandfather, for goodness sake, and dear old Angelica had always held a special place in his heart.

Probably best he'd taken it on in the end. She was a good girl and the fact that he knew her outside of this mess would surely help her today. She trusted him, and that was going to be vital. Yep, no fudging it, today was going to be a tough one.

He stacked his notes in a pile and pushed them into his bag. Not much to take actually. Not like a normal trial – much less formal, and no reliance on precedence or procedure. Strange animal, actually, a disciplinary hearing in a private school. A thin little pile of notes. He scribbled a quick Post-It note for Mara, and stuck it on her screen as he went through reception. She was no youngster anymore either. No harm in reminding her he'd be out most of the day, or certainly until lunchtime, and that his phone would be off.

He drove up the N3 to Woodhill Village. After only a few kilometres he had left the sunny morning in 'Maritzburg behind him and, as he climbed the escarpment towards the Midlands, he drove into the clouds. Hell, this weather up the hill is always crappy, he thought. It may as well be England! Why would people choose to live up here?

He took the highway off-ramp and turned right. As he crossed over the bridge, he saw a young man jogging along the road in a school uniform he didn't recognise, with a school satchel on his back. He was jogging with his right thumb out. Poor kid, probably late and the rain was coming. He stopped and watched the youngster sprint up to his car in the rearview mirror. He wound down his passenger window. A broad, gappy smile filled his window frame.

'I'm going to Hill House. Are you going that way Sir?'

'Sure, hop in. I'm going straight there.'

'Thank you Sir. Could you drop me at the security office at the entrance to the school?'

'No problem.' It was surprising that this boy was travelling away from the village and towards Hill House in that uniform. All the types of schools this fellow was likely to attend were in the other direction.

'Where are you at school, my boy?'

Mpophomeni Secondary School, Sir.'

'Ah, don't know it. But that's the other way?'

'Yes, Sir, but I forgot something at Hill House and I need to go back.'

'Oh dear, you're going to be late for school, my boy. Not good. You chaps need your education.'

'Yes, Sir. I will finish school, Sir.'

He thought of asking this boy more. He seemed to have a nice way about him, but he wasn't sure he could trust himself to judge these days. Anyway, these conversations always turned awkward and ended up with doling out cash. It was easier to travel the few kilometres in silence. He needed to keep his mind on the day ahead.

The jingle for that philosopher-radio host played on East Coast Radio. He liked to listen to his daily one-minute wisdoms. What was his name? He turned up the volume.

'Secrecy is one of the paving stones on the road from teenager to adulthood. Teenagers will always have a part of their life that is secret from their parents. It is our duty to allow them that. If we honour this then, as they emerge into adulthood, their secrets will fade along with their belief that they can trust the adult world. And they will need to decide when and what they are ready to share.'

Not a bad message, actually. He thought of his own secretive grandson for a moment – all scowls and closed doors. Good old homespun wisdom. Not enough of that these days. Mind you, it was not always realistic. Look at Holly's matter, for example. She didn't want her mother and granny reading her statement for the hearing. Understandable. They were good

women, no doubt about that. Formidable, but good. Should that have made the girl's statement a secret? He couldn't really blame her for wanting to keep them from the details. Surely it was much easier to tell a stranger than to describe that awful event in detail to one's loved ones?

No, the more he thought about it, the more relieved he was that he'd agreed to take on the matter. She needed him as a voice of reason in that cacophony of matriarchs. He felt good about doing this for that fine family. In fact the least he should be doing was waiving his fee. Yep, Pro Amico was the way to go on this one. He must remember to make a note of that decision on his file.

He hoped Holly had practiced her statement in the mirror like he'd asked her to. She needed to come across well. Poor child. He wanted to kill that little trust fund kid when he first heard her story. But if he'd learnt one thing in all his years, it was that anger needs to be put aside as an attorney. It helps not one bit.

Maybe he should be chatting to the hitchhiker? But the silence was comfortable, and the boy seemed shy, the way he looked out of the passenger window. He also looked cold. Tim turned up the car heater. The least he could do.

Obviously a bright girl, that Holly. He wouldn't have added much to her statement, even if he could. Anyway, apart from his ethical obligations, it was really important in this case that it was her own account. In his mind he ran through the questions he needed to ask her, to ensure her account would leave no gaps.

Would she hold it together? He didn't know her well enough to answer that. He knew her better as a bouncy little toddler with that red hair and fiery spirit. Hopefully that spirit would be what it took to get through today. He thought about snippets of his consultations with her.

'Don't worry if you can't read it to your family,' he'd said. 'You'll do fine at the hearing with me. I think it makes it easier that they're a bunch of strangers there – what do you care what they think?'

'And Duncan,' she'd replied.

'Yes, and Duncan. But really, he's a stranger too, my girl. A strange stranger …'

'Not quite a stranger actually, Tim. I knew him. Or thought I did. Strange alright, but no stranger. I have to take responsibility for that part.'

'Well, stranger or not, he had no right.'

'Yes, I know. That's why I've got to do this. He needs to know. Even though he knew me …'

‘You can stop here please Sir. I can get out here,’ said the passenger, interrupting his thoughts.

‘Oh, right. Have a good day then young man.’ He stopped the car at the large wrought iron gates.

‘Thank you, Sir.’ He hopped out the car, slung his satchel over his shoulder, and gave the same broad smile as before into his rearview mirror. Not a bad sort, he thought. I should have made more of an effort to chat. He looked back into the rearview mirror and saw the boy wave to the guards and saunter through the gates, and then slip into their gatehouse. How disappointing. And after he’d gone to all that trouble to give him a lift and even turned up the car heater. Just as well he didn’t engage. As he suspected, that one was probably up to no good. What place did he have strolling into the guard house as if he belonged there?

CHAPTER 19

HOLLY

It could have been worse

Mum insisted they drive the five hundred metres from their home to the hearing venue on campus. A weird choice, but she guessed it had something to do with Mum not wanting to walk into anyone they didn't want to see. The car spluttered a few times, started briefly, then cut out. Mum pumped the accelerator. She realised it had been over a week since they'd driven anywhere. The VW stubbornly protested a few more times before awakening from its sulk with a belch. It clearly didn't appreciate being neglected for that long.

It was ten to nine and Mum driving her could only mean she'd taken the morning off work. At that time on a Friday morning she should definitely have been teaching. Maybe, then, seeing as she'd taken the time off, it wasn't too late to change the agreement. Maybe she should have insisted that parents be present when the discussion on the rules of the hearing were agreed to – what Tim called 'The Rules of Engagement', which had been settled in letters between the lawyers before the hearing date. They both stared ahead as she drove around Warrior's Way.

'Mum, could you actually come inside with me?'

'Sure, like to help you set up?'

'Well that, and maybe stay with me?'

'Hol, hasn't it been agreed that there will be no parents?'

'But maybe we can change that?'

'I'm not sure. We can ask, I guess? Of course I'll come if you want me to. But they'll probably make me sit away from you, if they agree to the change. And it'll mean his parents will obviously be allowed too – both of them. Shall we ask Tim?' She ironed her dress over her knees with her hands.

'No, I'm being stupid. Just nerves I guess. It's fine, I suppose.'

'We can ask. Honestly, the worst they can do is say no.'

'No, let's leave it. I know Tim doesn't mean to, but sometimes he scares me. Well, not really scares, but disturbs me. It's not worth it. You can't protect me now anyway.'

She wanted Mum to offer a response, some words of comfort. But she was silent. Her right knee bounced up and down, as it always did when she was restless. Mum took her hand from the wheel.

‘Try not to …’ she completed the sentence by resting her hand heavily on Holly’s thigh to stop its bounce. Holly placed her hand on top of Mum’s, and their hands held each other tight as she came to a halt with one hand on the wheel. She concentrated on stilling her leg.

No other cars were there and nobody was around. Dark clouds hung low and full. Tim’s car rounded the corner and stopped nose to nose with theirs. He waved at them through his windscreen and gave a big smile, as if it was a pleasant surprise to see them there. They blew out simultaneous long breaths as Mum opened her door. She clutched the notepad Nana had bought her, and her pencil bag, in sweaty fingers.

‘Can I carry that for you?’ Mum asked.

‘I’m fine Mum. I guess it’s show time.’ She tried to make her voice sound cheerful.

They exchanged polite greetings with Tim. On her first day of primary school she’d wanted to throw herself into her mother’s arms and be carried away. This felt the same. She recalled howling, ‘I’m not big enough yet’, and clinging to her mother’s legs. Her mother had prised her off and handed a weeping child to the teacher, all the while whispering to her, ‘You’re right, you still feel too small for this because you probably are. But you’re brave Hol. You’ll be okay’. Now again her mother hugged her tightly and whispered into her ear.

‘You’re so young, you shouldn’t be going through this. But you’ve always been our tough little kid. Remember that? Dad used to call you his TLK. You’ll be okay.’

A large black Land Rover approached. Tim politely turned her and guided her by the elbow into the hall. She looked back as they pushed through the door. Mum’s arms were crossed. One hand moved up to cover her mouth so that only her large, wet eyes stared back at her. Like the speak-no-evil monkey. Mum briefly waved a small wave before putting her hand back to her mouth. Then the door shut behind them.

Why did it have to be The Mem Hall? This huge place with its high ceilings and wooden floors. The honours boards with their gold writing plastered all the walls between long sash windows that cast black checked shadows across the floor, like a chessboard. Since there were only a few of them allowed in the room, surely a smaller place could have done the job? She saw the white plastic chairs placed a bit like a courtroom at the front. She counted them and tried to figure out who would sit where. There would be herself, Tim, Duncan, his lawyer and the judge. They were positioned on the wooden stage at the furthest point from the entrance to the hall. The rest of the room stood empty, except for rows of chairs at the back of the hall near the entrance, which presumably stood there all the time and hadn’t been stacked away. What was this room normally used for anyway? It was a weird thing about Hill House

that she never understood – so many clean, white rooms and buildings that seemed to stand unused and empty most of the time, as far as she knew.

She seated herself in the plastic school chair at the double desk next to Tim and doodled a rough layout of the hall on her notepad like she'd seen court reporters do in TV legal dramas. Tim set folders, pens and pencils in front of himself in neat rows and placed a small plastic pack of tissues in the middle of the desk. He gave the pack a double pat. A gesture that said, 'They're here if you need them'.

The pair of heavy wooden doors banged open with a whump of air and two people walked down the middle of the hall. One carried a briefcase, the other a laptop. She knew it was him and his lawyer, but she was relieved they were silhouetted against the light so she couldn't see their faces. Just two outlines. She was surprised to see the one outline was a woman's body, obviously in a neat tailored suit. She couldn't remember whether Tim had mentioned that or not and she told herself it wasn't a big deal. She didn't want to stare. She knew without waiting for them to come closer that he would be wearing his Number One uniform. She looked down at her notepad and continued to draw her map of the hall. She didn't need reminding of the braids on his blazer and the scrolls below the left breast pocket. She refused to look up as they got closer. Turns out Mum was probably right – what else could she have worn? But would they notice that her blazer only had a half braid around its edge? Would they know this meant he had earned full colours and she hadn't?

She made a heading on her notepad, 'Tell Tim'. Then she scribbled out 'Tell' and instead wrote above it, 'Discuss with'. Then she looked at how messy her first page was and ripped it out. Tim would be sitting right next to her and reading his notes. She began again, making sure her writing was neat this time. Tim touched her arm.

'You okay?' She didn't look up and busied herself with her list. She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. He poured them each a glass of water and placed one in front of her.

She focused on making a perfectly round bullet point on the page, going over and over it until it was a dark dent and the page beneath it hollowed out. Then she wrote, 'Full/Half colours not a big diffs.' But it was important that he knew she was due to receive colours, maybe even in two categories – academic and music.

She made her next point: 'On track for academic/music full colours – final awards ceremony soon'.

Would the judge distinguish that Duncan's colours were for rugby?

'Not the judge, the Chairman,' Tim had corrected her several times in their consultations, 'you address him as Mr Chairman.' Surely rugby colours would work against him? Would

they imply strength? Smugness? Would the Chairman understand that rugby players are almost always smug and entitled in this school? She made a further bullet point and wrote, 'Duncan colours – rugby. Strong guy. Go figure?'

But then she worried that she might not actually get awarded colours. And the Chairman would probably refuse to make generalisations about rugby players. She scribbled out the points one by one. She ripped the page out and scrunched it up to join the pile of crumpled pages on the corner of the desk. She looked around for a bin. A square metal classroom bin stood underneath the judge's table. They obviously didn't deserve bins as the accuser and the accused. Sinners don't get bins. No such thing as sin bins here.

At the same time, as if they were reading her mind, both lawyers walked towards the only bin that stood beneath the Chairman's table. They arrived at it together and both bent to grab it, as if unaware that the other was after the same thing. The start of a tussle began, with four hands on the bin.

'Oh, I'm so sorry. We haven't met properly. Good to put a face to a name. You must be Brittany?' Tim let go of the bin with his right hand to shake the other lawyer's hand, but kept a firm hold on the bin with his left. Brittany kept both hands on the bin.

'And you are?'

'Tim Potter, representing the complainant, Holly Weaver.'

'Oh, of course. Sorry, I expected someone younger,' said Brittany. There was a tone of reprimand in her voice, as if Tim's age was his fault. Both hands hung onto the bin.

'Ah well, this is old me,' said Tim. Why was he trying so hard to make friends?

'You don't mind if I take this, do you?' said Brittany and smiled a pretty, blonde smile, then turned, and a pair of neat stilettoes carried her back to her side of the room before Tim could answer.

'S'pose not.' Tim turned and walked towards Holly, raised his eyebrows and rolled his eyes for Holly's benefit, as if to say, 'What a princess'.

'I'll go and ask for one,' he said, and turned and walked back towards the entrance doors to the hall. She wanted to run after him and beg him not to leave her there alone. She scribbled on her notepad making more bullet points and pretending she was making important notes. She could not raise her eyes from the page in front of her to look towards the table where Duncan and Brittany were seated. But surely it's not good to seem intimidated? She forced herself to look up at the walls around the room.

She pretended to be intrigued by the details on the wooden panels that clad three walls of the hall. In gilt writing each panel had a different heading – Head Boy, Rugby Captain, Head of White House, Head of Armstrong House, and on the lists went. Beneath each heading, year by year, the names of boys appeared. She knew she couldn't keep up the pretense of being interested in these lists for too long. How interesting can a list of boys' names be? Her eyes came to rest on the last entry of the panel listing rugby captains: '2017 Duncan Chylde'. It stood in large, gold capital letters almost directly behind his head as if it were installed there to label him in that moment. She felt her cheeks grow hot and she looked back at her notepad and continued to doodle. She heard the doors flap open and closed and saw Tim bustling up the hall holding a plastic bin in his two hands in front of his chest as if he'd just been awarded a school trophy.

'Look what I've got.' he beamed.

A man strode through a side door by the low stage with a large briefcase that almost matched Brittany's. It was faded and brown while Brittany's was black and shiny. She hadn't noticed Tim's. She looked down on the floor to her right. Between them on the floor was a narrow floppy bag that could no longer stand upright. It was missing a buckle. It looked like the kind of campus bag that teachers use to carry their books and marked assignments. Overworked and tired.

The Chairman stood behind his table and nodded in the direction of each party.

'Morning, morning. Let's get right down to it, shall we?' he said and began slapping piles of paper out of his bag and onto his desk before he pulled out the seat and sat himself down. His thick lips puckered as he stacked papers into piles – like Sarge's pink bum that tightened and expanded with any exertion – his grey eyebrows knitted in a solid line like a moustache that had slipped upwards and lodged itself across his brow instead of above his top lip.

'Right. My name is Brian Hayter and I am here as Chairman of this school disciplinary enquiry. As we all know, I am here to deliberate on a complaint laid by Miss Holly Weaver, represented by Mr Tim Potter, against a Hill House College Grade 12 boy, Master Duncan Chylde, represented here today by Ms Brittany Blunt.' As he spoke, beneath the moustache-brow, was a pair of eyes the colour of milky marbles that shifted between immobile lids of puffy grey flesh. The mouth puckered and relaxed, the eyes rolled and slipped, and the rest of his features remained motionless and colourless. Holly thought of a ventriloquist's puppet as she watched him lay out the details of the matter.

‘I don’t need to remind you that the procedure here is less formal than a normal court hearing. So, not being a court of law, we have all agreed that I have some latitude to determine the procedural guidelines. Nevertheless, I ask that we please stick to certain conventions. Mr Potter, you may ask your client questions during the course of her evidence for the sake of clarity, but Ms Blunt if you could leave your questions until after her statements. Similarly, Ms Blunt, I will allow you to interject in the giving of your client’s statement where you feel it is necessary, but Mr Potter if you could hold off until after that is complete.’ The words slid past her as she focused on stilling her twitching right leg.

She felt Tim’s hand tap her arm. She turned to him. He gestured with a tilt of his head that she should respond to Mr Hayter’s question. She had obviously missed that it was directed at her the first time.

‘Miss Weaver, would you like to begin by making a statement?’ he repeated.

She looked through her notepad. Where was it? How could she have left it? She had written and re-written it so many times. She’d had it with her earlier, now it was gone. Tim had even asked her, ‘You’ve got your statement, right?’ ‘Yes,’ she’d said as she patted her pocket. She had practiced it in her mirror, like preparing for a school oral. Did she know it well enough to give the statement without notes? She pushed her chair back and stood up.

‘Mr Chairman, I had a statement prepared, but I’ve lost it … Well, I’ve left it somewhere. I’m sorry.’

‘Would you like to go and have a look for it, Miss Weaver?’

She thought about running across the school campus to home. She imagined running into crowds of boys out on break. Did she leave it on the floor of Mum’s car? She wasn’t sure she could trust herself to find it. Or to ever return if she left here now.

She thought about the girl who’d burst out of the auditorium and escaped from Mr Goff’s assembly speech. Holly was relieved that the attention had shifted away from her thanks to Melissa. Her performance in assembly became the talk of the day as girls rushed between classrooms. She had dashed out and it was soon discovered she had gone missing. Teachers and prefects hurtled around the school in search of her and lessons were interrupted in the frantic search. Later, at lunch-break, there was a commotion at the school septic tank system – a marshy area that stank of sewerage and was fenced off at the bottom of the school. Holly sat alone and pretended to read in the shade of a tree so she didn’t have to listen to all the gossip when she saw Melissa being frog-marched up the hill and across the school grounds between gatherings of girls eating their snacks. The two teachers, who were on either side of

her, had her at arms length and their other free hands were blocking their noses. As she came closer, Holly saw that Melissa's blue uniform flapped open with buttons undone. It was brown and wet and her hair and face were drenched in what looked like mud. They walked right by her and Melissa called to Holly.

'You see Holly, we're worth shit, girls like us – not ladies, don't know our worth, no morals. Sluts us lot, aren't we? Hashtag me too!' The teachers tried to pacify her and picked up the pace, and disappeared with her towards the other side of the school. She knew that voice from outside the bathroom cubicle. There were mutterings throughout the day that she was admitted to Fort Napier Hospital for psychiatric observation.

'I'll try to go on, without the paper. I think I'll manage. May I?'

'Go ahead.' The Chairman's moustache-brow wrinkled into a frown of disapproval.

Tim was shuffling through his notes and pulled out a page. He slid it across to her. She looked down to examine it and recognised the first line. It was his copy of her statement. It had handwritten comments down the side of the page in red. It looked like a school essay. But a bad one where the teacher had gone mad with nasty comments and question marks everywhere. This must be his copy for questioning. She couldn't make out what all of his writing said. A single tear dropped onto the page to smudge his red notes.

'I'm sorry, Mr Chairman. I've changed my mind. I can't make a statement.' She sat down and looked at her hands in her lap. Tim stood up.

'May I question my witness Mr Chairman?'

'Yes, yes. Please do. By the way Mr Potter, no need for all this Mr Chairman formality. You can remain seated if you like while you do this. Not a courtroom you know.'

'If you don't mind, your Honour, sorry, Mr Hayter, I'd prefer to stand. Force of habit you know.' He smiled at the Chairman. The Chairman stared back at him, his mouth puckered into a tight knot again, as if pulled by a drawstring. Then released.

'Well, get on with it then.'

'Right. Good. Miss Weaver, can you explain to us the events of the night of 21 October 2017?'

Why had she arrived here thinking that just because she could set out what had happened in writing, send it to Tim to read, and practice it in the mirror, that she would be able to stand in this room and give her version? Mum and Nana had both asked a few times if she wanted to read it to them, but she'd felt there was no need for them to hear those messy details. Tim

and her had spoken about this. She thought it would be easier to say it to a bunch of strangers. That had made sense, until now. Then she remembered what she'd said to Tim.

'I want him to hear what he did. To remember and to know.'

Her hands fidgeted and her right knee bounced. She stood up and pushed her heel into the floor, but still it trembled, if a little slower. Tim sat down. She turned her back to Tim and faced the Chairman. She began to speak, focusing on a dirty spot on the grey theatre curtain that hung behind the Chairman's head. Her voice was quiet and slow.

'I went willingly that night. I was foolish. I agreed to go into a dark change room with a boy. He opened up with a key and he locked it behind us. He locked my dog outside the door and I asked if we could at least let my dog come inside with us. He made a joke, said my dog was too young to witness what we were going to do. Not in dog years, I said. And then we made other jokes and I thought he was funny. It was raining and the noise on the tin roof was loud, so he had to come close up to me so we could hear each other. He whispered in my ear. We began to kiss and cuddle. I felt cool and grown up. It started out as fun and that was what I'd gone there for. I knew, or I hoped that we would have some sort of physical … um… contact.'

'Uh, excuse me, Miss Weaver, may I interrupt you for a moment? Tim interjected from beside her. 'Could you explain what you mean by this?'

'Well, I liked him. I wanted to be kissed by him.' She avoided eye contact and continued, coyly. 'I was being teased by all the girls at school about that, but I wanted to be de-greened, I guess?' She felt annoyed that she had said it as a question, like Tim would know the answer. She said it again, like a statement.

'Yes, I wanted to be de-greened and I wanted a romantic time. I thought that was what we were both going there to have.'

'De-greened, Miss Weaver?'

'It's slang. I know it sounds stupid, me being in matric and all, but I hadn't been kissed before. So I wanted this to happen before I left school. I was the only matric … I don't know why it hadn't happened until then. I guess I'm just slow that way compared to my friends.'

'Thank you. Please carry on Miss Weaver.'

She looked down at Tim's version of her statement. This was the part where she had to describe him lifting her top and all that. Next to the part about being de-greened. There, in red pen, was a big question, 'Was this your first kiss ever?!'

Well, the first one that really counted. There was that once when she was with Justice, in primary school – she was about nine, so he was probably eleven. They agreed they needed to

practice with each other so they'd both know what to do when they were big and married. Not to each other, of course. That was the whole point of this practicing. It needed to be with someone who you definitely could never marry because then, after practicing on someone you didn't love, imagine how good you'd be when you really meant it and were really in love. Anyway, that kiss was quick. When they tried to stick their tongues into each other's mouths it felt to her like sucking an earthworm, so she said they had to stop. He stopped and they giggled and went back to catching tadpoles in the dam. Funny, it turned out that her first real kiss, or maybe it was her second kiss, wasn't with someone she loved either. And she was obviously so good at that one that he wanted more than a kiss, even if she didn't love him, or by that stage even like him. How was it possible to feel like a naïve, pathetic baby, and at the same time feel like a whore?

'Miss Weaver, please continue,' said Mr Potter, 'and would you please raise your voice a little. I'm finding it difficult to hear.'

She thought about drama lessons and projecting her voice to the back of the room. She began again.

'Soon after that he lifted my top, undid my bra and he … I didn't stop him, but I was starting to feel scared. I know I should have stopped him, but I wanted him to like me. I know this sounds childish Sir, but I guess I was trying to be part of the cool crowd, so I didn't. Not then…' She paused. She was aware that she had still not looked at Duncan or his lawyer. She needed to stare at them soon. Show them she wasn't scared.

'Then he was pushing me onto my back on a bench. And then he was forcing my legs open. I asked him to stop. I called out to my dog who was whining at the door and scratching it. Nobody else would have been out there. So I called for my dog – 'Sarge, Sarge' I shouted. Sounds stupid, I guess. But there's no one else there in the middle of the night.'

She heard him muttering across the room, and papers rustled. She looked across at Duncan's table. He was whispering in Brittany's ear where her blonde hair was hitched behind it. She thought of that voice, hot in her ear. On her neck. His hand was on Brittany's shoulder. She remembered those fingers in her mouth, dry and bony. Brittany was smiling and nodding. She looked as if she may laugh as she flicked her hair aside and wrote something down. She heard the heavy doors behind her flap open and closed. She turned to face the Chairman again.

'He pulled my shorts and my panties, sorry – my underwear – to one side with one hand. He pinned my hands over my head with his other hand. He's strong. He lay on top of me. I

felt the wooden slats of the bench beneath my back. He felt heavy. I couldn't move.' She remembered feeling the wooden slats pressing in ridges into her back.

She stopped and tried to breathe a bit slower. She took a sip of water. Her voice felt dry and her throat felt tight. 'I felt as if the wood grain was rubbing against my skin.' She'd never understood that idiom before – against the grain – but now she got it. Or maybe she didn't.

'I felt something pushing and pushing and pushing and then ...it felt sharp. I felt … split.' Her breaths were coming out in short gasps, but she would not cry for him this time.

'Apologies, Miss Weaver. I am sorry to be so … so indelicate. You are saying Duncan Chylde penetrated you, is that what you're saying?'

'Yes,' she said, her voice clear and stronger now.

'Again, I am sorry to ask you to recall this in such graphic detail, but how do you know what part of his body penetrated you?'

'I know it was – it had to have been – his penis, what else could it have been? Both of his hands were holding mine by the wrists above my head at that stage. He was breathing into my neck and into my ear. I don't know why I didn't … couldn't stop him. Maybe I could've but … I froze. I stared at the ceiling and counted … in time, sort of … then … well, it was over.'

'Miss Weaver, can we be clear on one point? Did you tell him to stop?'

'Well, at one stage his hand was over my mouth, his fingers were in my mouth for some of it … I tried, but it was difficult.'

'But you did tell him to stop?'

'Yes, before I called for my dog I begged him, "Stop. Please stop". Then I called my dog, "Sarge, Sarge!"'

'Would you like to continue Miss Weaver?' said the Chairman. His grey face showed no movement. Just those puckering, twitching lips.

She knew she had more to say. The part about how she lay there while he got off her. She wanted to explain how she faced the wall mostly, so he wouldn't see her crying and so she didn't have to watch him getting dressed. How she couldn't even remember how he got undressed. Was it while she was looking at the inscriptions below the pictures of all the rugby teams on the walls? She couldn't remember. All she knew is that afterwards she didn't have to get dressed. She arrived barefoot, she left barefoot. She was wearing a pair of baggy T-Sav shorts with an elastic waistband and panties, and a bra that he'd undone but not taken off, and a T-shirt.

But she didn't speak. She shook her head, just like she didn't speak that night. Then she sat down. Tim patted her arm.

'Not too bad. It could have been worse,' Tim reassured her.

The lawyers and the Chairman were busy discussing things, and she thought about what he'd said that night – afterwards, while she didn't speak. He'd said two things: 'You're cute, Blue Roses', then later, as they were leaving, 'Let's go'. Why hadn't she explained the long story to the Chairman of how she came to be known by him as Blue Roses?

Was it important that he opened the door? That he stood back from it to let her go first and that he followed her? Should she stand up again and say what happened next? That he turned to lock the door, and while he was busy doing that she ran off back to her house? That Sarge had gone? That she called for Sarge? That Duncan didn't try to follow her? That he didn't try to stop her?

CHAPTER 20

JUSTICE

Carry our dreams all the way to law school

There was always one guard who took it upon himself to announce the guarding allocations and postings to the group. He knew what was coming. As usual he got there before the others and checked the board. So he was waiting for the jibes as they crowded around the notice board of the school's security office. Mandla read the notice in deliberate, slow intervals.

'Guard: Justice Makathini. Location: Memorial Hall.' He paused to ensure he had the entire group's attention then, raising his voice, proceeded in a tone of exasperated indignation. 'Purpose: Special Assignment – Disciplinary Hearing of Scholar. Times: 9 am to 4 pm.'

'Every time. How do you do it, Justice?' asked Amos, the old guy with one empty eye-socket and a big dent in his forehead. But his back was turned to Justice and he directed the question to the group of five guards sitting together along the wall.

'Blom's bitch,' they chimed in unison. Justice didn't look up.

Sure, the favouritism was becoming embarrassing, but he wasn't going to complain or defend it. Mr Blom, head of security, liked him. It was that simple, and anyway, he only had a little more than two months of this job to go before he went off to university. Yes, he was the only part-time worker, while the others were all career security guards, whether they admitted to it or not. So of course it wasn't fair. But he hadn't asked for any special treatment. It helped in the beginning that Blom had known and trusted Mkhulu for years, like most of the Hill House staff, and that Mkhulu had explained that his grandson had university ambitions and that this job was what he needed to reach those. But he was also careful to stay on the right side of Blom. It was essential if he was to get what he wanted out of the guarding job in one year. If the other guards weren't willing to play the game, why should he feel bad?

'Don't let them distract you from your dreams, Justice,' said Gogo. 'Stick to your plan and keep your head low.' And keep his head low he did. He ate alone while he read his school setworks in the tedious hours of guarding in pairs, rather than gossiping or exchanging smutty jokes. He always arrived early for roll-call, and he smiled and said, 'present Sir', like he imagined an ex-army sergeant like Blom would like. On his solo guarding rounds he was polite enough to the other guards as they passed each other. But he acted busy and stayed out of their way most of the time. Most of them had made up their minds about him anyway. He was used to the Coconut accusations. He'd had them most of his life and they hardly bothered

him anymore. With hindsight, he knew he'd made a stupid mistake in the first few days on the job. He had shouted his mouth off.

'It's a one year part-time stint,' he'd said, and then later gone on to explain to one-eyed Amos that this was his means to his university end-goal. He'd chatted too confidently about how he had it all worked out – that he was going to re-write matric this year to get better marks, and to save money at the same time. They'd be marks good enough for a scholarship this time, not just university acceptance.

Of course the story was repeated to all the other guards by Amos. Some of the old guys had laughed sour laughs, and said 'Ja, ja. We'll see about that'. But old Freddie had defended him.

'Leave him, he's not a bad guy,' he said. On some nights as they passed each other on their rounds he would stop for a chat while he quickly lit a smoke.

'Ignore them, Justice,' he'd say between puffs. 'There are always people whose jealousy damages dreams. Most of us watch young guys like you with pride. Please achieve this for us and prove the angry ones wrong.' On another night he waved across the car-park to Justice, and called, 'Do us a favour, Justice, you carry our dreams around Warrior's Way and out those McKenzie gates all the way to law school.'

All these months later and still most of them treated him as an outsider. As he strolled the school grounds alone on night shifts, he wondered what possessed him to have been foolish enough to brag to an audience that he should have known would resent his ambitions. Then he reminded himself why he'd done it. If he spoke of his goals he was making them more real to himself. His pride was on the line now and he didn't care if they were cynical. He was almost there – just a few more matric exams to write and, based on his trial marks, he already had an invitation to a scholarship interview. Just over a month of school left and then nice easy money guarding over December when the school was empty anyway. Yes, law at Howard College, UKZN – the University of KwaZulu-Natal – was within his grasp, despite their doubts or desire to see him fail. He just needed to manage himself sensibly and stay on the right side of Blom until the end of the year. Once or twice he tried to steer the other guards towards a better relationship with Blom in a jokey way.

'Ag guys, c'mon? We're all in this together. None of us can afford to bite the hand that feeds us,' he said, as they dragged themselves into the security office, always late. 'In fact we can't even afford to bite the hand that doesn't feed us. Look sharp man,' he'd say as Mandla sulked, while knowing his wrong shoes wouldn't pass their uniform inspection.

‘Go ahead Justice. You lick that white ass of Blom’s and you get yourself a nice daytime posting sitting under a warm shelter with vokol to do but look official,’ sneered Hercules. ‘We’ll take the night shift on Warrior’s Way.’

Justice also hated having to lie to Mkhulu and Gogo, but he knew if he said he was planning on missing school to take up a special daytime guarding duty assignment they would be furious. He had his own good reasons, but they would never understand. He had a plan up his sleeve of how he would be able to watch the lawyers in action at the disciplinary hearing. Surely this was more important for his future than another ordinary day at school?

He had already accepted a lift offer from Mkhulu, who had said he had to go into town that Wednesday to collect his pension. He knew Mkhulu would be suspicious if he changed plans now, or said he didn’t need the lift. So he got up early, got into his school uniform and rode with Mkhulu as far as the highway turn-off to Howick where Mkhulu would be going the other way. As soon as Mkhulu’s car was out of sight, he crossed over the road and put out his thumb to hitch straight back to where he had already come from. He had his security uniform stuffed into his satchel and his plan was to get back to school, make a quick change in the guard house at the gate, and get to his post before the nine o’clock start of the hearing. What a giant waste of time, but worth it if he could keep Mkhulu from getting suspicious and if he saw the law in action. So far the plan was going according to plan.

He joined the short queue of hitchhikers who were all trying to get to Hill House for their day’s work. He was used to going the other way at this time, but he understood the unspoken first-come-first-ride rules of hitchhiking. Luckily there weren’t many others gathered there yet, so it wouldn’t take long for a ride. There were always contractors or visitors going that way. The gathering point was a crush of dripping nose-ends under umbrellas, huddled with hands held over smoking half-oil drums. Informal vendors had stalls selling individual sweets, cigarettes, NikNaks and fruit – neat piles huddling under a sheet of clear plastic to save the merchandise from the soaking rain.

The hikers in front of him signified their destination with a hand signal – a steeple of fingers – every time a car approached. Its symbolism was obvious to teachers who lived off campus or the regular contractors with cars. Many of them stopped to cram their cars full of hitchhikers, especially on misty, wet days.

He watched the people around him edge forward as those at the front caught lifts. He smiled as he remembered Holly referring to these contractors as Pocket People – a good name, he thought, with each different uniform displaying the name of their contract employer on the left breast pocket. The cleaning staff wore pale blue pants suits with green piping, their

breast pocket badges read ‘Clean Scene’, surrounded by blue soap suds. The catering staff in their Royal Mnandi black and orange wore a pocket badge sporting a crown. He silently nodded a greeting to a pair of men a few people behind him in the queue, from Knight Force Security, his security company. He didn’t recognise them. Not surprising, since he was used to working with the night shift team.

It took less than half an hour and he had a lift. A friendly enough man, who said he was going to Hill House, pulled up.

‘Sorry, space for only one,’ he said when he stopped, which wasn’t really true because there was nobody in the back seat. But beggars can’t be choosers. As Justice got into the car and thanked the man for the lift, he glanced into the back to see piles of books and cardboard boxes and a dirty dog blanket. What a mess! Justice promised himself that when he owned his first car he would never let it look like that. The man didn’t seem keen to chat and, as they got going again, he turned up the radio station. Justice knew this was a wordless way of saying, ‘we don’t need to talk’. So he sat quietly and listened to the driver’s favourite radio station, as he had done on so many previous hitched rides between Hill House and school.

He slipped into the guard house at the McKenzie gates to change, and got himself to his post outside the Mem Hall a few minutes late. He hoped that the rain would keep pouring down. This was part of his plan – at some stage he would slip in and post himself just inside the door where he could hear the lawyers arguing. If Blom came to check he would make up some excuse. He’d probably get away with saying it was too wet outside, and assure Blom he could do his job just as effectively from inside the hall. And Blom would buy it. But Blom had issued clear instructions that he was nervous to disobey.

‘It’s a disciplinary hearing for one of the boys, Justice. No idea what he’s been up to. None of our business. Probably the usual crap these rich kids get up to – they’ve got no boundaries. Anyway, you just ensure that no other boys try to sneak in to listen, and no strangers from outside the school either. Not even staff, except the Headmaster of course. Definitely no people who look like journalists. No cameras or laptops or recording devices of any sort. You shouldn’t have any trouble. We’re probably being over-cautious even posting you there. But I’m told it’s a sensitive matter that could damage the school’s reputation if it gets out, so we can’t be too careful, I guess, you get my drift? It’s a closed hearing. There are a few lawyers, and the kids involved in the trouble, and that’s about it, as I understand things.’ Justice nodded at the right intervals and tucked a few key words in here and there, between Blom’s barrage of instructions. Words like “journalists”, “lawyers”, “sensitive” and “closed hearing”. He had worked out that this tactic seemed to reassure Blom that the

instructions were understood, and it usually saved the whole list of instructions being repeated twice or sometimes three times. All he needed now was a bit of time out there, and a lucky break, and he would watch the law in action.

CHAPTER 21

TIM

There's just no telling how a witness will fare

Holly had not fared well at all. Where on earth had she put her prepared statement? The poor girl had come across so differently here to what he'd expected. Mind you, if there was one thing he'd learnt over the years it was that there's just no telling how a witness will cope. She was such an articulate young lady in his office, with such a strong view. And now this helpless, quiet creature.

He didn't have the heart to say much. He didn't need to. It was obvious she knew her evidence had been poor. She was certainly bright enough to realise how nervous and defensive she sounded. He couldn't bring himself to say much more than, 'it could have been worse'. He was also bothered by the fact that the Headmaster, Mr Macdonald, came in during her testimony and saw her at her worst. He really didn't need news getting back to Grace about how badly it had gone. It wouldn't help to have her in a state.

He remembered the pathetic fledgling he had seen through his window lying on the lawn a few days ago. He'd seen his Jack Russell stalk it, its soundless beak gasping for air. He'd wanted to beat against the window and shout to the bird to stop flapping its wings, which drew attention to itself.

'Heel Phoebe, heel,' he'd yelled. But it was too late.

He rifled through his papers to check again if perhaps he had a clean version of her statement. Nothing.

'Don't worry dear,' he muttered to her. 'Perhaps you want to double check if the statement is somewhere at home? Or I can swing past the office to run off a copy and we can probably still ask to submit it.' She didn't respond. She sat silently and picked at a loose thread on a button, refusing to look up. 'That's a lovely blazer, by the way. What's that braid for – academic colours, I suspect?' he said, trying to get her to thaw. She didn't respond. He picked up his bags and stood, hoping she would follow his lead, but not wishing to force her.

'Half colours,' she said from behind him.

CHAPTER 22

HOLLY

Her answers were questions

'May I cross question the complainant please, Mr Chairman?'

'Go ahead.'

'Miss Weaver, I just have a few questions for you. Mainly to confirm that I have understood you correctly. Let's go back to that night. Did you, in the lead-up to having intercourse with Duncan, at any point push him off yourself, or close your legs, or physically indicate in any way that you did not want to have sex?'

'I tried,' she pleaded to be believed. He was on top of me – he is quite heavy. I felt pinned down. Trapped.'

'Miss Weaver, would you please stand up and come around the table?' She did as she was asked and moved into the middle of the hall. The attorney gestured to a spot where she should stop. 'Please face the Chairman.' She stood and stared at her shoes, suspecting what was coming next. She felt his presence next to her. She saw the sleeve of his black blazer brush against hers, but did not feel it.

'Mr Chairman, I ask you to observe that there is not a particularly large difference in the height of the two parties. Miss Weaver, do you agree that you and Duncan are of a similar size?'

'I suppose so.' She felt cold and hot at once.

'Miss Weaver, could you please speak up,' she said.

'Yes, we are the same sort of height, but …'

'Thank you Miss Weaver, you may return to your seat. Am I correct that you are a runner and you play hockey at school?' She was relieved to be back at her chair where she could sit down. She watched the attorney retrieved some notes. She spoke without looking up, as if the answer didn't matter anyway,

'Yes, Ma'am, I do.'

'So it is fair to say you are a reasonably fit, strong girl?'

'Yes, I would say so.'

'So you are fit, strong, a similar size to Duncan. You're no wilting violet. Yet you didn't even try to push him off?'

'I can't really explain …'

‘Well, that’s most unfortunate. Now may I ask you, Miss Weaver, if you were raped, as you allege, did you go home and wake your mother that night and alert her to what had happened?’

‘No I didn’t.’

‘Would you like to explain why not?’

‘I was scared. Confused, I guess. I knew she would be mad because I shouldn’t have been creeping around at night.’

‘Miss Weaver, your mother is, by all accounts, a reasonable woman. She is an extremely well regarded teacher, by boys and staff alike. A pillar of the community, so to speak, as I understand things. Would you agree?’

‘I think she is.’

‘So she is known by most people who know her as reasonable and approachable. Do you have a good relationship with your mother?’

‘Yes, I think so, Ma’am. I mean sometimes we argue, but that’s because she’s strict. I guess she wants the best for me. She’s protective.’

‘So your mother is protective, she wants the best for you, your relationship with her is good, and she is a reasonable, sensible woman. But you were scared to tell her you were raped? Forgive me Miss Weaver, but you’re a bright young woman I gather. This isn’t really sounding that logical.’

‘My Mum has lots on her plate. She’s on her own. I didn’t want to worry her, and I wasn’t sure …’

‘What weren’t you sure of? Whether you were raped or not?’

‘No, not that. I suppose I should have told her right away. I just didn’t.’

‘Did you tell anyone else?’

‘Not until a few days later.’

‘And why is that?’

‘It’s hard to explain. I was scared, I guess?’

‘Don’t ask me why, my girl. You’re the one who was there.’

‘Sorry …’

‘Let’s turn to the end of that night. After you had sex, did you and Duncan speak at all?’

‘He spoke to me.’

‘And what did he say?’

‘He said something to the effect of, “You’re cute, Blue Roses”.’

‘Can you explain?’

‘It’s an allusion to a famous play – ‘The Glass Menagerie’ by Tennesee Williams. He saw me perform a monologue of a character from it. This girl, Laura, her nickname is Blue Roses. I think he thought I performed the role well, so after that he called me Blue Roses.’

‘So he told you he liked the performance of your monologue?’

‘Yes, he did.’

‘So you two spoke and interacted on a few occasions before that night? You had a connection.’

‘Yes, we did.’

‘Was there anything about him that scared you? Did he seem aggressive at any stage?’

‘No.’

‘Which is presumably why you agreed to meet him? And because, in your own words, you “liked him’”, Miss Weaver?’

‘Yes.’

‘So at some point before that fateful night, he approached you and asked you to meet him in the change room. You’re in matric, right, Miss Weaver? Surely you had a suspicion what you were going to meet him for?’

‘I had a sense, yes. As I said, I hoped we might kiss, maybe a little more, I don’t know. I had a crush on him. I guess I didn’t think it through.’

‘Well, Miss Weaver, you should have thought it through. Girls of your age ought to be thinking these things through.’

She had an answer to that. In fact, she had a few. Her answers were questions. Why was she being blamed for something he had done? How did it work that she was being made to look guilty in order to prove his innocence? Do girls need to hide themselves away at night and not meet up with boys because boys are so monstrous? Are girls supposed to spend their days and nights tormented by the shadow of this fear of attack? That was not how she had been taught to see boys. Are boys taught to be careful of girls late at night, and if not, why not? Girls don’t push themselves onto boys and then say they couldn’t help themselves, or that they didn’t know the boy didn’t want it, or that his no meant yes. Why is that? These questions that she had worded so carefully, better than now, came back to her in jumbled form. She cleared her throat and began to push her chair back to stand. Tim interjected from next to her.

‘I am sorry Mr Chairman, is there a question in that statement by Miss Blunt?’

‘Apologies, Mr Chairman, I withdraw that remark.’ She flicked her hair over her shoulder and paged through her notes. There appeared to be no rush in her movements.

‘Miss Weaver, when you left the change room, can you explain what happened?’

‘He, Duncan, unlocked the door and said, “let’s go”, or something like that.’

‘So what, did he let you out first? Or did he go out first?’

‘He opened the door and stood back to let me out first, Ma’am.’

‘Thank you. Finally, did you see a doctor after you had intercourse?’

‘Yes, I did, but only once I’d told my mum. It was quite a few days after the … after that night.’

‘Thank you, no further questions.’ She felt Tim press a tissue into her hand.

CHAPTER 23

JUSTICE

Not a bad guy

As if it wasn't already obvious how little some of the guards liked him, Esau had warned him recently.

'We're just waiting for you to put a foot wrong, youngster. And you will. Everyone does. When you do, don't look to us for help. You creep off to your mlungu friends for help then and let's see how far that get's you."

He tried not to dwell on the menacing tone of those remarks as he sat on the plastic chair outside the Mem Hall and waited for the gap to slip inside. The wind came from the north and blew in rain at his legs. His trousers were soaked through. The skin on his feet felt soft inside the soggy socks that slipped around inside his heavy boots. He was glad he didn't have to stand, or worse still, walk around. What difference would it make whether he was inside or outside for the purpose of this assignment? He was pretty sure nobody unexpected was going to bother to traipse through this rain across to Mem Hall. He wished he could just see what the lawyers looked like, even if he didn't hear them in action, but he remembered Blom's words.

'Chances are you won't even come across the legal teams, because they've each been allocated one of those little side-rooms as their base for the duration. I've been told they'll get in much earlier than the start to set up and prepare their witnesses. We only need you on post once proceedings start at 9 am.'

'Yes, Sir. 9 am,' Justice had confirmed.

'It must be quite a serious business, I'm guessing. So call me if there's anything that worries you. A few last things. You don't need to stand to attention all the time. But I don't have to tell you that if you sit, look smart, sit upright. Stand up if anyone comes and help them to open the doors, but you don't need to usher them inside.' He spoke slowly, and his voice got louder with each new detail. 'This weather is awful, so try to stay dry. We can't have our guards looking like drowned rats,' he'd said and handed Justice an umbrella and a large waterproof jacket that kept his top half dry, at least.

He sat with the umbrella angled at the rain as the hours passed. Boredom and exhaustion were regular companions in this job. But it was too cold to doze off, so he paged through a study guide to Othello. It could quickly be tucked out of sight into his jacket if someone came. He became distracted, wondering if this hearing would be like a real courtroom drama.

Or like a TV series? He persuaded himself that there were probably lots of boring bits, like the Oscar trial. It was probably just as well he wasn't allowed inside where he wouldn't be able to study.

He paged through the book. He had found it lying near the Hill House tuck-shop a few days before. He'd decided to keep it for a day or two before handing it in to the security office. No harm in that – it wouldn't be missed. Some Hill House boy must have had his hands too full of tuck-shop goods and left it behind. It would find its way back to him eventually. 'Peter Jackson', it said in bold letters inside the front cover. Then on a line beneath the name it said, in a different handwriting, 'is a nob', and a hand-drawn picture of a penis stared at him. He corrected the spelling of nob to knob and congratulated himself that he could spell better than a Hill House boy.

He flicked to the page with a title, 'The Most Quotable Quotes Explained'. He tried to memorise some of lines. The words just wouldn't stick. He closed his eyes and tried to picture where the words fitted into the play. He couldn't imagine them being spoken, like the study guide told him to do. He couldn't even pronounce some of the words. So all he had to remember was how to spell them right.

'Hello Justice,' he was startled by a voice. He shot open his eyes and dropped the book as he jumped to attention. Mr Macdonald bent to pick it up out of a puddle at his feet. He wiped the book off against his coat and shook it off. 'How have the exams gone so far?' he asked, looking at the book's cover. Mr Mac opened the cover. Justice stood open-mouthed trying to find words. As if it wasn't already obvious that this kind of book wouldn't be issued to a student of Mpophomeni Secondary School, the words, 'Peter Jackson' glared at them and then the penis drawing and the rest. He fished for an explanation in his mind and began stammering.

'I know most English teachers hate study guide use,' Mr Mac said, flipping through the pages. 'Whatever makes it easier, I always say. Besides, I know you've studied the original play as well, so no harm in a combination,' he said as he handed the book to Justice.

'Thank you, Sir.' They stood in silence for a moment, both staring at the book and then Justice began.

'Sir, I …'

'I don't see why you can't sit just inside the door, if you like?'

'Sir, Mr Blom posted me here.'

'Yes, but I'm sure he wasn't expecting this foul weather when he did.'

'I don't mind, Sir. It's my job.'

‘I don’t think you’ll do it any worse from inside. Besides, if you get sick while you’re cracking those matric exams of yours, your grandparents won’t forgive me,’ he smiled and patted him on the shoulder. Not for the first time, he wished he had a headmaster as understanding as Mr Mac. Mkhulu and Gogo had so much goodwill for important people at this school, he thought again, for the hundredth time. Would he even have gotten as far as matric if it weren’t for a childhood of running around on this campus among its staff and their children? He knew he was the only valley boy who had somehow managed to slip from the Hill House world to the Teapots Valley and back again throughout his life without anyone seeming to object or even notice, thanks to his grandparents.

‘Come on. Let’s move you inside,’ said Mr Mac, and held the door open for Justice. A deep man’s voice swelled towards them from inside the hall.

‘You tell Mr Blom I instructed you to sit inside,’ he whispered as they moved inside silently. ‘He knows you’re not a bad guy.’ Mr Mac moved quietly to a row of chairs near the back of the hall and slipped into a seat. The heavy wooden doors banged before Justice could catch them. He didn’t dare look towards the gathering at the front of the hall, and he turned to close the doors securely.

He put his plastic chair down as quietly as he could to the left of the door, but still the scrape of the legs on the floor seemed to rasp and echo. He rested the closed umbrella against the wall. What a relief to be out of that rain, except it was as cold in there as it was outside. The voice echoed in the hollow hall and he paid no attention to the words. He concentrated on settling himself in the chair as quietly as possible, conscious not to cause any distraction by bumping anything against the back wall, or knocking anything over.

Justice took in the layout of the room. It felt like a courtroom because it was echoey and formal. The walls were covered in wooden panels with lists of names in gold lettering on each panel. But there was no judge’s bench like he’d seen on TV. No witness box. There was a table facing the back of the hall. It looked like a schoolboy’s desk and, sitting behind it, facing towards him was a man sitting at the table alone. He had papers and notes scattered around him and a jug of water and a glass. His head was stooped over his papers and he appeared to be taking notes. Occasionally he looked up at the man who was speaking. Justice decided that must be the judge.

There were two longer tables closer to Justice, at right angles to the judge’s table in the centre. At the table on the left, seated closest to the back of the hall, sat a fat, elderly man in a scruffy brown suit with a wide grey tie and brown shoes. He looked a little familiar. The bald back of his head was visible as he faced the judge, and the mass of his body, and the arm that

he was leaning on, obscured the second person sitting at the table. He was now speaking, but remained seated. His accent sounded formal and his voice was brittle and frail. It was difficult to hear what he was saying with his back faced to Justice.

At the second long table, facing the first table sat a young woman in a smart suit. At her side sat a thick-set Hill House boy with a blond fringe that hung across one of his lowered eyes. He also looked familiar. He wore his uniform and looked down into his lap. There was nobody else in the room except Mr Mac.

'Please continue,' said the bald old man.

Then a girl's voice rang out. Unmistakable. As soon as she spoke he knew it was Holly. Her voice was always loud and clear. She too remained seated as she spoke. Her words were slow and she paused between each sentence.

He listened to her evidence come at him in waves. He hated hearing what she was saying, but he sat rooted to the chair, unable to tear himself away from the agony of what he was hearing. He prayed Holly wouldn't notice him hiding in the shadows. He rode out the pauses and the silences between her answers, and the paper shuffles and the lawyer's interjections and questions, and he willed her to stop speaking. Yet he knew he needed to hear what she said. In those silences and pauses he tried to push aside an angry memory of Holly and her friends that stubbornly invaded his thoughts.

It was July and he was dispatched to patrol the parking area for the visiting school buses. All the private girls' schools from the Midlands area sent busloads of girls to Hill House on that main rugby fixture day. He had been surprised to see how many rugby fans there were filling up every seat of the four buses that rumbled into the school at eleven o'clock and parked in his area. As the buses stopped and their doors hissed open, swarms of uniformed girls buzzed out – a different insect species – one bus of blue and yellow, one of yellow and black hatted, one of red and blue, and one all black. He stood a little distance away and watched, putting on his best security guard look, stern and upright. Prefects stood in scowling rows as juniors filed past them and were ordered to tidy their hair, do up buttons, take out earrings, pull skirt lengths down and their socks up. Wave after wave of girl groups walked past him and, once they reached a safe distance from the prefects, they again messed up their hair, lifted their skirts higher, loosened their ties, applied gloss to their lips and put their jewellery back on. All to a chattering din.

He spotted Holly's red hair before she climbed off the bus. She wouldn't have expected to see him in a security uniform, working, so she didn't notice him as she walked arm in arm

with a group of girls. As they approached, their voices carried across to him. They were all gabbling too loudly and at the same time, as if they were hoping others would hear their plans.

‘Hurry, I promised Josh I’d get here in time to see him warm up,’ chirruped a tall blonde girl as she herded the bunch down the middle of the road towards the rugby fields.

‘Calm down Sarah, make him wait. Stop acting so desperate,’ said a girl whose uniform was stretched tightly across her big chest. Then she placed herself like a roadblock in front of them.

‘Stop. Right, let’s see. How do we look girls? Hot enough for our favourite rugby players?’ And she began adjusting one friend’s blazer and fiddling with Holly’s plaits, and they all turned to each other and fussed over each other’s clothes again and took selfies.

‘Holly, can we go past your house first to sort out our hair?’ nagged Sarah.

‘Seriously? Your hair is fine. Trust me, the guys won’t even notice, all they can think about is rugby right now,’ said Holly.

‘Then it’s our job to make them think about something else,’ said Sarah, and she hitched her skirt a bit higher still.

A fourth girl with short legs who had been trotting a few steps behind them caught up and added between frenzied snorts.

‘No rush, girls. Remember we’ve got all the time in the world once the rugby’s over. Holly, you’re such a doll for having us stay tonight. Let’s make sure we take a stroll from your house all the way around Warrior’s Way this evening.’

‘Ooh yes, Holly, please. But you may have to make yourselves scarce for a while when we’re near Armstrong House,’ giggled Sarah.

‘Ugh Sarah, you’re such a slapper,” said the big-chested one, and they all giggled. He stepped forward as they passed him.

‘Hi Holly.’ They seemed startled. They stopped and bunched closer around Holly, their interlinked arms now gripping each other tensely. One girl seemed to grab her imaginary pearls as if considering what to do if he snatched them and bolted. It would be Hill House’s first on-campus mugging in its celebrated history.

‘Justice, hi,’ she said. Her voice had a panicked cheer to it.

‘I hope you’re all shouting for Hill House?’ he teased. Silence for a few too many seconds then a chorus.

‘Yes, yes … Hill House all the way.’

‘Sorry to be rude and rush off, but we’ve got to get going. Anyway, see you around, Justice,’ she said and turned with her pack and walked off at speed.

‘Who was that weirdo?’ he heard one say.

‘Ag, just our maid’s son. He used to hang around our house in the holidays. Not a bad guy,’ she said.

‘Eeww, that sounds creepy,’ said Sarah as their voices trailed off.

Justice stood up and crept to the door. He quietly pushed the heavy double doors open and slipped out, quickly closing them behind him. He felt like a voyeur. He wished he hadn’t entered that room. As the cold air struck him, he remembered who the old lawyer was – he had given him a lift that morning.

Outside in the rain, he wanted to be sick. He wanted to run. He wanted to explain to someone. Instead he sat and waited for the day’s guarding to end and watched the rain drip off the edge of his umbrella and puddle around his shoes.

CHAPTER 24

DODGE

A senior salute

‘Duncan. Duncan? Would you like me to address you as Duncan, or do you prefer your nickname?’

‘Sorry. No, Ma’am, Duncan is fine. I’m also known as Dodge, but Duncan’s cool with … sorry, I mean, Duncan is fine with me.’

‘Right, Duncan. You’ve heard Miss Weaver’s version. You have your own statement to make. Would you like to read that for the Chairman?’

‘Yes Ma’am. I have a prepared a written statement here. May I hand a copy to the Chairman and read it out please?’ He stood up and made a hesitant gesture to take the statement to the Chairman’s table. Brittany took one copy from him and walked over to the Chairman and handed him the statement. The eyeballs and mouth were the only moving parts on the smooth, marbled face of the Chairman. The grey eyes rolled from side to side while the lips pursed and fidgeted. He waited, not sure if these movements meant yes or no. She turned to him and smiled, giving him a nod of encouragement.

‘Go ahead Duncan.’ He made sure he didn’t look across the room to where Holly was sitting before he started speaking, as they had warned him not to do. As he cleared his throat, he reminded himself to keep eye contact, and not to rely too heavily on his notes. Brittany had assured him she would cover anything he forgot by asking questions afterwards.

‘My name is Duncan Chylde, I am also known as Dodge to my friends and some teachers at Hill House. I am sorry I have brought the school’s name into disrepute. I love this school and I am proud to be a Hill House boy.’ He looked at the high walls around the Mem Hall covered in wooden boards with names of other Hill House boys written in gold, and he felt the pride of his words. He felt proud of his name sitting there amongst the others.

‘Part of being a Hill House boy is about becoming part of a brotherhood. I consider myself to be part of that brotherhood and I like to think they consider me as one of them too. Us boys get up to mischief, and we have traditions. Especially as matrics. In our last few months there are rites of passage we all like to participate in. Sorry, in which we all like to participate. I think the teachers and the Headmaster know a bit about some of these, or suspect anyway, but they don’t know the details. They could never know the details. A Hill House boy never splits … sorry, Hill House boys don’t betray each other.’

The Chairman looked up from his notes, nodded slightly at him and returned to his writing.

'We have a tradition called the Senior Salute. I am here today because I was part of this tradition. I realise now that it is a demeaning tradition that is not respectful to young women and I am now sorry. But I am not a rapist. I am a boy who approached a girl and asked her to meet me in a secret place on the school campus after lights out. I admit this is breaking the school rules, and I accept any punishment that is due to me for this. But Holly agreed to meet me and when she did, she knew what she was meeting me for. All the girls at St Agnes know about the Senior Salute as much as us boys do. If you accept an invitation to a Senior Salute you know what you're going there for.'

He looked at Holly at this point. Brittany suggested to him that when he made a point about what Holly knew, he should look at her so that the Chairman didn't think he was lying. Her eyes were down and she was writing or drawing on a notepad.

'Holly knew what she was meeting me for, otherwise she wouldn't have met me late at night and allowed me to take her into the First XV change room. We spent about half an hour in that change room. She saw me lock the door when we went in there together. She never asked me to unlock it. She could have left, but she stayed and we talked for a while. Then we started kissing and … making out. She didn't stop me from taking off her clothes – I didn't take off all her clothes. She seemed to be enjoying herself. We had sex. I am not proud of that fact but I cannot deny it. She was willing to have sex. I am not a rapist, Sir. I am a Hill House boy who agreed to meet a girl in the middle of the night to see what would happen. It's part of a childish boys' tradition. I understand that now. But I did not rape Holly Weaver.'

He looked directly at her again as he spoke these last words. She returned his gaze through clear eyes that did not blink. Her head shook slightly from side to side as if she was in disbelief, but her expression gave nothing away. Her bottom lip twitched. The rest of her body was frozen.

He turned to Brittany, who smiled and nodded, as if to say 'well done'. Then her questions came and they were all easy enough because they were expected.

'Purely for clarification,' as she said. The questions that followed from Holly's lawyer were a bit tougher, as he expected them to be, but there was nothing he wasn't prepared for.

'Do you deny that she said "please stop"?'

'Sir, I did not hear her say "please stop". It was raining hard, we were in a room with a tin roof – it was hard to hear anything.'

'Come on, Duncan. You were right next to her. Surely you heard her say those words.'

‘Sir, I did not.’ As he said those words he remembered the preparation from the legal team at Waterstones. He looked into the grey eyes of the Chairman. Then he fixed onto Holly’s blue eyes for a few seconds until she looked away, and finally he stared into the eyes of the lawyer who broke eye contact first to look at his notes.

‘This Senior Salute. Can you explain? Do all boys who participate arrange these secret trysts? Is it always in the rugby change room? At night?’

‘No, Sir. Part of the tradition is to meet girls in different venues on our school campus. It’s a huge place – lots of empty buildings – even private spaces out in the open on the estate. There are a few well-known places around the school that have been used over the years. The girls seem to know about these as well, so I guess they’ve talked. But it’s not always at night, in fact it’s often not at night. We’re an all boys school, so often it’s difficult for us to meet girls on the campus at night. So on weekends – perhaps on Sundays on the school estate – they’re allowed to come for picnics. There are lots of places and times.’

‘So, can you clarify: does a matric boy earn the Senior Salute by having sex? Is it earned through having sex, preferably on your school campus, with a St Agnes girl, and then bragging to your friends about it?’

‘Yes Sir, that is correct.’ He remembered to acknowledge this softly and to look down as if there was an unspoken apology in his words.

‘So after your encounter with Holly, you went back to your friends and bragged about it.’

‘Sir, I admit I am not proud of the fact that I returned to my friends and showed, with our traditional sign, that I had sex.’ As he spoke he put his hand up to his forehead as if to salute. On the edge of his vision, to his left, he saw Holly’s eyes squeeze closed. ‘But Sir, if I may ask, surely, if I knew I had raped a girl, I would not have returned to my friends to admit I’d had sex? Would I not rather have hidden the fact?’ The lawyer did not respond.

‘When you were planning your meeting with Holly, did you use the words “Senior Salute” at any point in conversation with her?’

‘I do not recall whether I did or didn’t.’

‘So it’s possible that Holly did not understand, or think that she was meeting you for a so-called Senior Salute, or that she didn’t know what a Senior Salute was?’

‘It’s possible Sir. I don’t know what Holly knows or doesn’t know. But she knew she was meeting me in a quiet, private place, where it was going to be just the two of us. We had also spoken before and we’d … well, we’d flirted before. There was a mutual attraction I would say. I think she had a pretty good idea.’

‘What? A good idea that you may kiss and cuddle? Does that mean she knew you were going to have sex?’

‘No Sir, I am not suggesting she knew we were going to have sex. Not even I knew we were going to have sex. I hoped, but I didn’t know. I went there thinking it was possible, but I wasn’t going to have sex with her if she didn’t seem keen. She seemed keen enough Sir.’

‘And what if I put it to you that she was not keen? Not keen for sex, but perhaps keen for something less than that. How shall I put it? A little intimacy of some sort with a boy she liked, but who she did not want sex with?’

‘Well, Sir, I didn’t get that impression. She would have needed to express herself more clearly. She lay back on the bench in that change room and her body language, her reactions to me, suggested that she was willing. Or certainly not unwilling.’

‘Did you ask her if she wanted to have sex?’

‘No Sir, I did not. But nor did I hear her say she did not want to have sex with me.’

The lawyer’s face was shiny as he turned to the Chairman and said, ‘No further questions’, then he returned to his place at the desk next to Holly and pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and began patting his face. Holly was looking down at her lap and Duncan saw her fingers fiddling with something in her lap. He didn’t know much about law, but the balance of probability had been explained to him, and from what he could see, the balance was tilted in his favour.

‘I think this is a good point at which to adjourn for the day,’ the Chairman said. ‘We will continue at 9 am tomorrow.’

CHAPTER 25

JUSTICE

Law is stupid

The mist dampened the night sounds. Only his footsteps scratched against the gravel of the short path to the front door. He gave three short knocks. A soft light shone under the door, but the windows were dark. A dog barked half-heartedly, then stopped. He waited a few minutes. Okay, so he'd tried, but nobody was there, or they were asleep. He turned and walked up the path and opened the little iron gate. Its creak seemed loud and the old dog's bark rose again. He thought about going home to Gogo and Mkhulu to tell them what he had done, to say he would lose his job and probably his university chances, and that he'd disgraced them.

He stood still in the open gateway, waiting for the dog to stop before he moved. The thought of that afternoon came to him again. Law is stupid. It searches for someone to blame, but where's the point in that? How does choosing whether someone is guilty or not help? If pain is inflicted on someone, whether intended or not, the victim's pain remains. The causer must fix that. Either way it's the same, whether the harm was intended or not. What difference did it make that he had not meant for Holly to suffer? He had caused pain. He turned to go back.

'Justice? Is that you?' He turned around. Big Mac was wearing a dressing gown and slippers.

'Yes Sir, Mr Mac.'

'Do you want to come inside?'

'I think so Sir, or I can explain here Mr Mac. I'm sorry to wake you.'

'No, I was working on the other side of the house, don't worry. Come in.' His hair looked ruffled like he'd been sleeping. He felt foolish at the Headmaster trying to make him feel comfortable and pretending he'd been awake. He wiped his feet on the straw mat outside the front door. He slipped off his wet security uniform jacket before entering, and began to shake it off.

'You can do that inside, you must be cold. Come, let's dry that against the heater for a few minutes. Tea?'

'No thanks Sir, I don't want to take up much of your time.'

'Everything okay Mac? Who's there?' A woman's voice came from the other side of the house.

‘Don’t worry Dear, it’s all fine. One of my students. Won’t be long,’ he replied.

‘Sir, I think I should go. I am disturbing you.’

‘Justice, if you’re here at this time of night, there’s a good reason. My wife is used to this sort of thing. You’d be amazed at the visitors I get at the strangest hours. Come, let’s talk in the kitchen.’

He followed him down the passage. The old dog looked up from his basket in the corner and gave a low growl that subsided as it got going. Mr Mac busied himself with putting the jacket over the back of a kitchen chair and moving it next to a heater.

‘Look, Justice, I hope you’re not here to come and explain about that Othello textbook? I could see that was a Hill House copy, but let’s just forget about that, shall we?’

‘Sir, I’m sorry, I did take the book, it was lying outside the tuckshop. But I’m not …’

‘Yes I know, boys leave lost property all over the show. Please can we both ignore this. I am sure Hill House can spare a book. The boy, who was it Peter Jackson? He should look after his things better.’ He smiled. ‘Turns out he is indeed a knob and must face the consequences of that.’ He chuckled at his own joke. Justice tried to smile back and thought about the spelling of knob for a moment and wondered if Mr Mac had given that any thought.

‘Mr Mac, I am here for another reason. Thank you about the book and I am sorry. But I have done something much worse. I need to say a bigger sorry.’ He took off his beanie and rolled it over and over in his hands. Big Mac stood in silence.

‘Mr Mac, it’s about the trial, the disciplinary hearing. I saw something that night.’

‘We’d better sit down.’

‘It was about two weeks ago – I must confess I was off my post. I am not supposed to sit. Mr Blom, he says I must walk all the time. But sometimes, if it’s quiet and late, I go to the shelter near the tuckshop. There’s a light there at the round concrete table with the benches and the thatched roof. I sit there and study sometimes, Mr Mac. I’m sorry, I know this is not what I am supposed to do.’

‘Go on Justice, what did you see?’

‘I heard Holly’s dog howling nearby. I went to investigate. He was at the rugby change room door, scratching and howling at the door. I went to the door, but I did not try to open it. I heard Holly’s voice inside. She was shouting, “No, Stop! Sarge, Sarge!” I heard other voices. I thought she was in there with a friend, or a few of them. I didn’t want to seem like I was snooping. Holly and I used to be friends, but not so much anymore. I think she is embarrassed about me in front of her new friends. It seemed rude to snoop.’

‘Justice, what did you see?’

‘Sorry Mr Mac, I am making excuses. I should have tested the door. I climbed up on something and inspected through the high window. But I did nothing more. I saw something. In the end all I did was take Sarge by the collar and lead him away. I took him home and put him inside the Weavers’ gate. Sarge and I go back a long way. He knows me.’ He knew he was babbling and not making much sense. He was terrified.

‘Did you hear Holly say those words in that change room Justice? You heard her say “No, please stop”, or something like that?’

“Yes Sir, I know why now, Mr Mac. I thought she wouldn’t want me to interfere. I …’ He could not look at Big Mac.

‘Justice, this is important evidence. Would you be willing to give evidence?’

‘Yes, Mr Mac.’

‘We need you to testify tomorrow. Go home now. Get some sleep.’ He stood and fetched the jacket off the chair. He handed it to him. ‘Please come back to my office tomorrow morning, early. Say seven o’clock?’

‘But what about Mr Blom, Sir? I need to check in with my tag at the checkpoints and to report at the end of duty tomorrow.’ He walked him to the door.

‘I will explain to Mr Blom in the morning, or even now. The school will survive with one less guard tonight.’ He gave Justice a pat on the shoulder as he saw him out the door.

He walked home in the mist using his guarding torch on the bumpy parts of the shortcut path to the Teapots Valley. He remembered his thoughts again, and continued to think about law as he walked. Surely what matters is what we do after we do wrong? One day he would be an important lawyer – a lawyer who made sure that people fix what they do wrong, whether they did it on purpose or not. He heard an owl hoot, as if to confirm his wisdom. Why wasn’t this sorted out in the law already? What a stupid system that has taught people to lie and say, I didn’t mean to, like this is some excuse, and as if that’s good enough. And then, if the courts believe you, it means you don’t need to fix the damage. A bat whisked around his head and silently disappeared. His guilt and his worry for Holly were too much to bear. Why should harm caused on purpose be more blameworthy than harm caused by mistake? He was willing to pay his price, and tomorrow he was going to fix things. Whatever that price was, it felt like it would be worth it in that moment.

CHAPTER 26

DODGE

Stop, please stop

He tried to concentrate on other things, like he'd been told to do. Not to let what Holly said get to him. He thought about his own statement like they told him to. He'd first written it all down with Pops. Then the lawyers had advised him to add details here and there. He felt like all he'd done for the past ten days was go over and over this statement – written and re-written, then said and re-said. Brittany guided him on when to pause, when to emphasise his words, when to slow down, when to speed up. It was like rehearsing a school speech, but the teacher was younger and seemed to care more. She was pretty too and she wore nice clothes, so he didn't mind their meetings, even though they took hours. Funny thing was, as he learned to say it perfectly, as if it really mattered, so the words came to mean less and less. He'd heard his own voice say the same thing inside his head so often that he couldn't feel them anymore.

'… he lifted my top … I didn't stop him. But I was starting to feel scared … I wanted him to like me ...'

He had to remind himself it was only ten days ago when he had wanted to admit that he had been wrong – that he had misunderstood, or gotten too worked up, or whatever it was. He wanted to ask if it wouldn't be better if he just said sorry. It felt like years ago that he thought that, and he understood now that it had been a childish response. If she really didn't want to have sex with him, why did she go alone with him to that secret place after dark? Why did she kiss him and laugh with him and chat so freely? Why did she lean herself against the wall of the change room with her hair in that ponytail and fiddle with the loose strands at her ears? Why did she tuck her small, freckled bare feet under his thighs and seem interested in his dream of studying in America? She had the same moves as Sally and Rachel – the hair tossing, coy smiles, pretty feet that tucked neatly somewhere under themselves or him. They also said no, and then they seemed to say yes. Or their bodies said yes, and their mouths stopped saying no. In fact, Rachel even went from saying no to saying yes. So he made a mistake. A stupid, childish, horrible mistake – he took her no for a yes.

'… I asked him to stop.'

Then, when it was all done, he realised from the look on her face, the way she didn't speak to him, how she ran away. Even after, when he went back to his dorm and the guys lined the corridor, standing to attention in a long row with dumb grins on their faces. Even then, when

they all teased and pushed and shoved and slapped his back once he gestured a salute, it didn't feel so great. Not like he thought it would. In fact, he felt bad about letting them know with that salute. But he knew better than to admit it. That was part of the code. You had to tell your dorm, otherwise it didn't count.

'… he lay on top of me … I couldn't move …'

He tried to speak to Pops about that stuff. But speaking to Pops wasn't easy. He started answering before the question was even asked. He'd drown out the thoughts with his speeches.

'But you've been tricked, Dodge, can't you see that? That girl knew exactly what she was going there for. Now she's embarrassed and she's blaming you! I'm sorry, but you need to choose here. Do you want that opportunity in the States? Or do you want to throw it all away by admitting to something that wasn't your fault? For God's sake, boy, you need to grow up and start to realise there are people in this world who will always try their luck.' He started to try say that he didn't think she was trying her luck, and that maybe it was the other way round. But Pops looked so mad. And he really did want to get to the States on a rugby scholarship.

'… I… couldn't stop him. I froze …'

He also thought of discussing it with Ma, but all she could do was cry these days, and he hated that. It was so useless and he never knew what to do. Should he hug her? Or pat her? Why could she not have a conversation without crying since this thing?

'… I said Stop. Please stop …'

CHAPTER 27

JUSTICE

A pretty ineffectual security guard

Mr Potter brought him into the hall and told him to sit quietly towards the back until he was called. He returned to the same seat where he had sat the day before when it was raining. He hoped that he was concealed by the shadows, as he had been the last time. He kept his eyes low, his head down, and he dreaded the thought of seeing Holly. He listened as polite morning greetings were exchanged in quiet voices, feet shuffled and chairs scraped.

'Mr Chairman, it has been brought to my attention that there was a witness to the events that are under discussion in this enquiry. This was not known to me until early this morning. I apologise for the irregularity and hope that you will indulge us?'

'Why has this witness only appeared now, Mr Potter?'

'Mr Chairman, he is a security guard at the school. He was unaware of the fact that this enquiry was playing itself out until very recently, and he only came to light late yesterday evening.'

'And how did he "come to light", as you put it?'

'Mr Chairman, he arrived on the Headmaster's doorstep last night with a statement of sorts, I am told.'

'The Headmaster's door? This is rather unusual. I imagine the Headmaster is busy elsewhere and not able to confirm this? Is there a way we can verify this with him?' As he spoke, the Chairman held his hand above his eyes as if to shade them, and he searched into the shadows at the back of the hall.

'I can't see a thing back there. Can somebody put the lights on at the back of the hall? I think the term they use, theatrically speaking is, house lights up, please.' Justice looked up to see the skin below the Chairman's neck wobbling as he chuckled softly at his own choice of words. The large desk that was jammed up against the stomach shook and its uneven legs marked time against the wooden floor. The lights above Justice's seat came on and at the same time he became aware of someone appearing over his right shoulder.

'Mr Chairman, that is correct. I am here to explain.' Mr Mac was now standing at his side. He saw the room of faces turn to look in his direction. Holly and his eyes met. He knew she could outstare anyone if she wanted to. He gave in without a fight and dropped his eyes again. He looked at a dark stain on the wooden floor a few metres in front of him. How easily would that mark be buffed away? He imagined Gogo clucking at the shoddiness of someone

else's work and then gliding an electric polishing machine over the spot until it matched the remainder of the shining bright strips of panelled flooring. He felt a hand on his right shoulder. Mr Mac's voice interrupted his thoughts.

'This young man, Justice Makathini, is a part-time member of our campus security staff. I have known him personally for some time now. He came to visit me last night to explain that he had witnessed certain things on that evening. I then made contact with Mr Potter, because I believe what Justice told me needs to be heard.'

The Chairman sat motionless and silent for some time. His eyes appeared to be doing the thinking, as well as his brain. They drifted across the expanse of the room before settling on its occupants, one by one. First Duncan, then his lawyer, then Holly, her lawyer, and then Mac and finally Justice. The young woman, Duncan's lawyer, stood up and addressed the Chairman.

'Mr Chair, if I may say, it's highly irregular for the Headmaster to become involved in matters of this nature. Is it correct that he is guiding the complainant on which witnesses she should present? Surely the attorneys should manage their cases in consultation with their clients and without outside influence?'

'May I come forward and speak to this point, Mr Chairman? I would like to explain,' said Mr Mac, and as he spoke, he walked towards the lawyers and the Chairman.

'Yes, please do. I would be delighted to hear an explanation,' the Chairman confirmed. Duncan's lawyer stood up again and straightened her skirt.

'Forgive me, Mr Chairman, all I am saying is that I have difficulty in understanding why this evidence has only surfaced now.'

'Well, Ms Blunt, in truth that's not all you are saying. Besides, you are quite entitled to put that sort of question to the witness, if you choose to do so. And, of course, if I allow his testimony. Aren't you?'

'Yes Mr Chairman, I do understand this, and if he is presented as a witness I intend to do that. But even though this type of proceeding allows for some procedural latitude, this does seem to be extraordinary by any standards.' The Chairman's ears had turned from pink to red. He gave short, huffing breaths and muttered sounds that, if they were words, made no sense.

'Ms Blunt, I suspect you have insufficient adversarial experience to speculate on what is extraordinary by any standards. So I think I will be the judge of what is and isn't extraordinary in my courtroom. I mean, my enquiry.'

As he spoke he straightened himself up in his seat, stretched his arms out and splayed his hands like webs, then laid them flat in front of himself on his desk. It seemed like a gesture

he'd seen on a legal series on TV and then practiced in front of a mirror. Then he cleared his throat and waited, like the Headmaster of Mpophomeni Secondary School did in assembly when he had to scold the school for a disciplinary infringement, Justice thought to himself.

'Mr Macdonald, I am confident that a Headmaster of your standing has good reason for this "irregularity", as Ms Blunt describes it. Would you like to provide a quick explanation?'

'Justice was unaware of these proceedings until very recently – there is nothing sinister in that, and it is perfectly plausible. As you know, this matter has been kept as private as possible in the interests of both parties. It's important to remember that Justice is not a full-time member of staff at Hill House, and he is also trying to complete his matric at the same time. The boy has a lot on his plate.' Mr Mac gave him a quick smile of approval as he said this. 'I doubt if even all the permanent, full-time staff, would be aware of this matter. Anyway, he came to see me last night to say that he had witnessed an interaction between Holly and … between the complainant and the respondent,' said Mr Mac.

'Well, Mr Macdonald, I cannot imagine there is any reason, as Headmaster of this school, to question your good faith in suggesting this witness is heard. I would like to get on with the matter and get to the end of proceedings without further ado. I believe a speedy outcome is in the interests of both parties here. It seems there are a few witnesses who have matrics to write and who need this behind them. Ms Blunt, and in fact all of you here, I must remind you this is not a trial. It is a disciplinary hearing where we have one child's word against another's. There are serious allegations being made and this forum was selected because it was agreed by all parties to be the least traumatic way of getting to the truth.'

His eyes seemed to be thinking again. They rolled and took in the room slowly. Justice thought of a pair of helium balloons that were tethered – they floated and rolled, then occasionally bounced down again, as if yanked by guide ropes.

He cleared his throat, and his voice rose.

'The allegations in this matter are, as I have said, serious and I am aware that my findings will impact on the futures of both these young people – both within their school environments and into their futures. I would ask all parties to remember this fact too, and to allow the process to run its course, perhaps with minor procedural irregularities, for this very reason. I am sure you all agree that there is value in an additional person giving evidence if this leads to better clarity on what happened that night. After all, this is what we all seek, is it not?' The balloon eyes seemed to be blown up by an invisible gust, and off they floated again. Then they came to rest on Ms Blunt in a watery stare.

‘I will allow the witness,’ he declared. She nodded wordlessly and sat down. Her mouth was locked into a tight line with invisible lips.

Mr Potter grinned and made a grand gesture with his hand for Justice to come forward.

As Justice approached he watched Mr Potter shuffle through papers. His disorganisation hinted that he wasn’t expecting such good fortune. He seemed surprised and unprepared. Justice came to a stop in the front of the hall and was directed to a chair that faced the Chairman’s desk. His seat closed off the fourth side of the square with the opposing lawyers and their clients sitting on either side of him, and facing each other. Justice sat directly opposite the Chairman and, as he attempted to root the Chairman’s glance, he wondered if the others in the room were watching the pounding of his heart that, by this stage, felt as if it was making his security uniform jump.

Mr Potter did little to introduce Justice, and was quick to get him standing and reciting his prepared statement, as if he feared that the opportunity might be retracted. Justice hadn’t had much time to prepare or rehearse the statement, but he didn’t need much. Those moments had played themselves out over and over in his mind in minute detail. After they spoke on the previous night, Mr Mac had advised him to go home and prepare a written statement. He stood up and began in a low, faltering voice.

‘My name is Justice Makathini,’ he said. ‘I am a part-time security guard.’

‘Speak up please, young man,’ said the Chairman. Justice began again, but this time he lifted his chin and locked onto the Chairman’s wet, blue eyes. Soon he was explaining all that he saw that night, and did not look at his notes. He spoke of Sarge howling, of Holly calling out, of peering through the window, then of leaving unnoticed by either of them. He felt sad as he spoke, but when he sat down he felt relief. He thought about Mkhulu and his monthly pilgrimage to the Catholic church where he whispered through the wooden screen to his confessor. Mkhulu would return and speak of a conscience washed clean. Was this what that felt like? Then Ms Blunt stood and took her time to lay out a series of documents in front of her. She looked at him and smiled.

‘Thank you for your statement, Justice. I imagine this was difficult and unpleasant for you to do. But let’s get to that a bit later. Let’s discuss a bit of background first. Could you please explain your unusual role here as a part-time security guard at Hill House?’

‘I am casual labour. So I fill in when there are guard shortages.’

‘Right, so you were on guard duty as a fill-in on the night that the events of this enquiry took place?’

‘Yes Ma’am.’

‘Can you please explain a bit more of your background? How do you know the Headmaster, Mr Macdonald?’

‘My grandparents have both been staff here at Hill House my whole life. My grandfather was a school driver for many years. My grandmother is the domestic worker for Mrs Weaver. I live with my grandparents and so I have met many Hill House staff members and their families.’

‘I see, so you know the complainant, Holly Weaver, as well?’ Justice nodded.

‘Right, so you know Holly, and have done for some time?’ Justice nodded again and whispered.

‘Yes ’M’

‘You don’t know the respondent, Mr Duncan Chylde, or Dodge, as he is known to most people in this school community?’

‘I now know who he is, Ma’am, but no, I don’t really know him.’

‘And where do you live, Justice?’

‘Teapots Valley Miss … Ma’am. It’s the housing village for the service staff of Hill House College. It is right here next to the campus. It’s for the staff who have been here a long time.’

‘Thank you Justice, yes I’ve heard of Teapots,’ she said with a hand movement that swept the words aside. It seemed to be a common hand gesture of the people who had heard of the Teapots Valley. An under-the-rug-swept sort of place.

‘So this is why you are a fill-in?’

‘Sorry, Ma’am?’

‘You live close to the school and you’ve got established friendships and relationships with the staff here, so this is why you are called to fill in at short notice when or if there’s a staff shortage?’

‘I don’t know. I suppose that’s why.’ Ms Blunt asked for a few minutes to make some notes. The room fell silent and the lawyers busied themselves with note-taking.

Justice thought about a conversation he’d drifted into with a Hill House parent who stopped to lift him from outside the school gates into the village. On that occasion the driver was chatty and asked lots of questions.

‘Why the school bag? Why the security guard uniform?’ Justice had explained that he was re-writing his matric so he could get better marks. He mentioned his dream was to get a bursary to UKZN to study law. He explained that his guarding was also helping him to save money towards this dream. The man had continued his questioning.

‘How do you manage both school and guarding?’

‘It’s not easy, Sir, but I wasn’t called Justice for nothing, Sir. My Gogo told me they always had a dream for me to be a lawyer one day. Now I am close.’ The man had smiled then.

‘I know Howard College Law School well. My alma mater. Not what it was, but I am sure it’s still good enough.’ Then he gave Justice an enthusiastic speech, most of which drifted over him while he surreptitiously glanced at his watch and calculated how late he would be for school. He remembered that the man used words like, ‘stay focused’, ‘reach for your dreams’. “Where are you going now?” he’d continued.

‘Mpophomeni Secondary School, up the highway, Howick North off-ramp.’

‘Ah, sorry, that’s a bit off my route and I’m in a hurry,’ said the man and he stopped at the taxi rank next to the highway turn-off to Howick. Justice thanked the man for the lift, got out of the Land Cruiser and shut the door. Then the window of the car slid down and the man leaned towards him.

‘It’s youngsters like you that give us hope in the country’s future. Keep at it, my boy!’ The window rolled up, he waved, and his wheels spat a puff of dust in the direction of the quiet line of people who blew into their cold hands as they waited for the next taxi. He watched him glide across the bridge in his large, shiny car, and turn right to join the highway travelling in the direction of Howick.

‘So you were on guard duty on the night of …’ Miss Blunt leafed through her stack of notes again.

‘The night of 21st October?’ offered Justice.

‘Quite right, yes, thank you,’ she said. Justice willed her to get onto the real questions. This gentle non-directional questioning that made him feel guilty before he was at the tricky part made him nervous. He concentrated on sitting still and thought about the fact that he would look guilty if he fidgeted.

As Miss Blunt leafed through her notes, a page fluttered off the table and landed on the floor in the middle of their human-square. He stood and made his way to the sheet of paper as Holly did. They both stopped and looked at each other. Their eyes and small arm gestures had a wordless conversation that said, ‘I’ll get it. No I will. Do you want to? No let me’. Before the “conversation” ended, he’d picked up the paper and handed it to Holly to return to Ms Blunt. Holly was as careful as he was that their fingers did not touch as the paper changed hands.

‘Justice, you explained how it was Holly’s dog, Sarge’s howling that caught your attention, and that made you go and find out what was going on. Can you think back to that moment when you arrived and heard the dog, and then heard Holly’s voice? Please explain, how did you recognise her voice?’ Ms Blunt interrogated.

‘As I said, Holly is a childhood fr … I have known Holly for a long time, Ma’am. I know her voice.’

‘Right, so you know Holly extremely well?’

‘Yes ’M.’

‘Please tell us once again what Holly called out.’

‘I think she said, “No, stop, please stop”.’

‘Justice, I’m afraid it is not good enough for you to “think” you recall her words. Do you remember her exact words?’

‘I know what her intention was. I may have the word order of it a bit wrong, but she was shouting, “Stop. Please stop”, or “Please stop. Stop!”’

‘You cannot presume to know her intention Justice. Please stick to what you heard. Is it possible that you have missed out some of what she called out?’

‘No, I don’t think so?’

‘My client, Mr Chylde, recalls that Holly called for her dog. Do you not recall her calling his name? Sarge?’ He felt his stomach churn. He had not mentioned her call for Sarge. Yes, of course, she had called for Sarge. That was separate. He remembered her voice now, ‘No. Please stop. Stop!’ Then she’d paused for a while and then called soon afterwards, ‘Sarge, Sarge!’ That’s why he hadn’t mentioned the Sarge bit. Surely it wouldn’t make a big difference? He just needed to explain that he remembered now, that he’d thought about how pointless it was for Holly to be calling Sarge. It made no sense. What could he do from outside the door? What was the dog going to do from out there? It was that frightened call for Sarge that made him realise she wanted help.

‘I apologise, yes she did call for Sarge. She seemed to be calling for Sarge to come and help her.’

‘How do you know that was why she was calling Sarge? Is it possible that what she was saying was all part of the same sentence? Could she have been saying, “Please stop Sarge”? Is it possible that the reason she said those particular words, including “Sarge”, at the end, is because she was imploring Sarge to stop whining at the door?’

He went back in his mind. Was it possible that Sarge was disturbing them? Or was it possible that Holly was nervous of getting caught because of the noise Sarge was making?

Was she calling for Sarge to stop because he was interrupting them? His throat felt dry. His neck itched beneath his collar.

'No, I don't think so, Ma'am. I remember now, I could hear from the tone of her voice and the way she called Sarge that she was asking him for help.'

'Justice, a few moments ago you don't recall that she even used the word Sarge. Now you recall her using that word, and you seem confident of what was in Holly's mind when she called it. And you are imputing that she used it because she was calling Sarge to help her. Now which version do you wish to go for?'

'I am sorry, I do remember she called for Sarge, and I know she was calling for him because she wanted his help. He is a very loyal dog.'

'I see, so you know the dog well too now?'

'Yes, Ma'am, I do know the dog.' He hoped his irritation could not be heard in his voice.

'So, did you try the door, Justice?'

'No Ma'am, I did not.'

'Why not?'

'Ma'am, it is difficult to explain. I have confused this in the past. I am not sure when I am wanted for help or not.'

'You're a security guard, Justice. I would think that's fairly self-evident. You are needed to avert any security breaches. Surely?' Justice did not answer. He felt his jaw tense. 'So what did you do?'

'Ma'am, I went to find a chair from outside the tuckshop area to climb onto it so that I could see into the high window and check if everything was okay.'

'And then?'

'And then I returned with the chair and climbed onto it and I looked through the window.'

'So why would you be concerned about intruding by opening the door? You were happy to look through the window, weren't you, Justice? If she is your friend and she seemed to be calling for help, why didn't you investigate thoroughly?' asked Ms Blunt.

'Ma'am, I should have. I wish I had. But I was embarrassed. I thought that Holly would not want me to interfere.'

'Why would you think Holly would view it as interference, Justice? Sorry, ignore that question – you cannot know what was in Holly's mind. Let's go back to the scene. What did you see?'

'Ma'am, I saw Holly and Mr Duncan Chylde lying together on the bench inside the room.' He gestured towards Dodge without looking at him.

‘Lying together? Could you be more specific?’

‘Mr Chylde was lying … Sir …’ He looked towards the Chairman. ‘He was lying on top of Holly on the wooden bench.’

‘And what was Holly doing?’

‘She was lying with her face turned to the wall.’

‘So Justice, let me get this right. You are a security guard. Correction, a fill-in security guard, who has this job by virtue of your connection to Holly’s family. If I may say so, by the sounds of things, you’re a pretty ineffectual security guard. You come across a situation where you realise Holly is in danger, you hear her call out, you have said to the court you understood from Holly’s tone of voice that Holly felt herself in danger. Yet you do not try to open the door. Instead you peer through the window and you see her lying underneath my client who, your suggestion implies, is forcing himself upon her. But you don’t try to stop this thing that is going on? You don’t bang on the window? You don’t go to find help?’

‘Ma’am, I know now that what I did was wrong. I should have done all of those things. But when I first saw Holly and Mr Chylde in the room like that, I could not see Holly’s face, and she was silent. I felt like an intruder. I did not feel it was right to interfere.’

‘Good grief, Justice. It is your job to interfere, to stop intruders, not to feel like an intruder!’

‘Yes, I know. It sounds wrong. I am sorry.’ He looked up at Holly as he said this, but all he could see was the top of her head. Her shoulders were tucked up around her ears. She looked like a small bird perched on the edge of her seat trying to brave the cold of an oncoming wind.

‘So then you take Sarge and lead him away, and you forget about the incident.’

‘I did not forget, Ma’am.’

‘Justice, you seem like a decent person and I cannot besmirch your character because I have no basis on which to do so. But surely, Justice, you can see that from your own description of events, if they are true, that if you saw Holly being sexually assaulted, which is what you have implied in your testimony, you should have brought it to a halt? She is your friend. Where were you? I am having difficulty with your version, Justice. I put it to you that either you are lying about what you saw and heard, or you are not the kind of friend I would like to have. If I had been in the situation you’ve described Holly was in, I would hope a friend who saw what you allege to have seen would come to my aid. Even if you weren’t a friend, what kind of security guard handles an obvious security breach in that way?’

Justice sat and looked at his hands. They trembled. He tucked them in between his knees but could not look up. He knew that all she said was true. What kind of friend was he? What kind of security guard was he? What kind of lawyer would he be? What sort of person?

CHAPTER 28

BRITTANY

How lucky is that poor girl?

She had to convince the guard not to phone Gran before letting her in. He was reluctant, but once she explained she was there as a surprise he was persuaded to ignore the retirement village protocol. Convincing people was her thing. She filled out the slip and promised to get it signed and give it back on her way out.

She pressed the door buzzer of Gran's duplex and waited at the threshold, hiding her face behind a bunch of flowers. Their scent filled the space around her.

'Surprise!' She popped her head around the roses as the door opened.

'Britt? Britt! What are you doing here?' Gran's eyes shone, she plumped her hair and straightened the front of her dress.

'My darling, don't do this to me. I look like a wreck. You should've warned me …'

'Where's the fun in that?' She hugged Gran into a muddle of flowers and arms and kisses.

'Why are you here? What a joy!'

'A work matter – a school disciplinary enquiry. The firm sent me down. Some naughty school boy.'

Gran took the flowers and with her other hand she guided Britt inside.

'Not that Hill House scandal?'

'How do you know about it, Gran? I'm acting for …'

'Everyone's talking about it, Britt. School's keeping mum – can't say I blame them. But lots of gossip around the village. I heard there was some sort of trial or hearing or whatever. Friends of friends involved in some way – you know how it goes down here. Always someone in the know. Anyway, I hope you'll nail the little bugger? Tell me about it.'

'I'm not allowed to talk about it, Gran. But I'm not there to nail him …'

'Well why on earth not?' Gran looked up at her, puzzled. Her milky eyes looked hurt.

'You've always been a softie, my Britt. But he needs to learn. He's young, I know, so maybe let the judge take that into account. But that's not for you to worry about, don't you let him off the hook.'

It felt too complicated to explain.

'Gran, can we talk about something else? I've had a hellish day.'

‘Of course you have. What a delightful surprise you’ve given me.’ She filled the vase with water and fiddled, arranging her roses. ‘Let’s talk about everything else – have you met the man of your dreams?’

‘Not yet, Gran, not yet.’ She moved around the counter to hug Gran again. Gran felt soft and lumpy and smelled of talcum powder. She wanted to fold herself into her creases.

‘Well there’s still lots of time. I suppose you’re too busy working, anyway. Come, let’s sit on my little verandah. I’ve just filled my bird feeders. Oh look, there they are already. Doesn’t take the house sparrows long to come in. What can I get you to drink?’

‘I’ll have what you’re having, Gran. Can I help you?’

‘No, no. You go and sit out there and enjoy the end of the sunset and the company of my feathered friends. Cane, lime and soda good? I treat myself to a single every evening when it’s hot like this. Just one, mind you.’

‘Sounds delish, Gran.’ As she moved outside her phone rang. The number looked familiar, but she couldn’t think who it could be. It could wait till tomorrow. She pressed the red button. It rang again. Persistent. Maybe some sort of work emergency?

‘Hello, Britt speaking?’

‘Ah Brittany, it’s Charles. Charles Chylde.’

‘Hello Mr Chylde, all okay? Is there a problem?’

‘Please, it’s Charles, no need for formalities. No, no, there’s no problem. On the contrary, I don’t want to count chickens yet, but I think perhaps we could have a – well, not a celebratory drink yet – what shall I call it, a thank you drink? Where are you staying? I could pick you up at your hotel and maybe even tempt you with a nice dinner?’

‘That’s kind of you, Mr Chylde, but I’m with someone right now. I’ve got plans for the evening, but thanks anyway.’ She hoped he didn’t detect the disdain in her voice.

Gran appeared with two glasses filled with a pale green liquid. Huge, square ice blocks shlucked against the side of the glass as she handed it over, and glossy drops of condensation trickled down the sides.

‘Who is it?’ Gran mouthed.

‘Client,’ Britt whispered with her hand over the microphone. Gran’s mouth formed a perfect O and she grinned and raised her glass as if to say cheers. Her chest puffed out and she bustled into her wicker chair. She pointed at a group of little birds on the feeder tray.

‘Look,’ she mouthed, ‘bishop birds.’ A pair of little red birds argued.

Such a fabulous old girl. Still savvy at eighty-four. She ignored the pinch of her conscience at the thought that Gran had it all wrong. Chylde gabbed on.

'… took the guy down … blind-sided … you got one past the goalie …'

Her conscience pinched again, harder this time – did she really have to turn so nasty on that security guard? She made neutral, meaningless noises to imply she was listening. She took small sips of her drink that she hoped weren't audible over the phone. How tempting to take a huge gulp.

'Let me not keep you, perhaps we can do something tomorrow night?' he said.

'Perhaps. Thanks for the call and we'll see you at Hill House tomorrow,' she said and gestured an exaggerated yawn and eye-roll to Gran, who gave a dirty chuckle that came from her belly.

'I can hear you're with someone … Lucky guy.'

'Good night Mr …' She stopped herself in time. Gran probably knew Chylde was the rapist's surname. 'Good night, Sir.' She killed the call before she could hear his reply.

'Ooh, he sounds impressed, my dear,' said Gran. 'I'm sure you're just brilliant at your job. Now look at these birds – there's a whydah … male pintailed. So territorial – always chases the others away! Watch, the others will come in when he leaves. Tell me, is your job rewarding?'

'On it's good days, I guess.' She tried not to sound too jaded. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt that sentiment – rewarded. Such a quaint notion.

They sat in silence as the weight of 'Maritzburg's heat lifted and the sun disappeared behind Town Hill. Gran interrupted her thoughts.

'You know, I had an encounter like that poor school girl once. I was quite a bit younger than you are now.' She huffed a sigh. 'In our day we never spoke about that sort of thing. We had to just, well, deal with it, I suppose,' her voice faded. The pintailed wydah cleared off.

'Oh no, Gran. I'm sorry. How come I never knew?'

'No, nobody did, to be honest.' Gran made a study of the birds squabbling over seeds and seemed unable to look at her as she spoke. 'Funny, I think you're the first person I've ever told.' She seemed locked into a memory. Or was it into shame? When Gran thought Britt wasn't looking, she made a quick swipe at the corner of her eye.

'Anyway, the world's a better place now – young ladies have people like you to help them out. But let's not talk about awful things and spoil our time together. Oh look how sweet – the little blue waxbills – they're my favourites. Well, them and the widowbirds. But they only arrive in the morning. All us old widows and all these widowbirds pop in to our feeders each morning to keep us company,' she smiled. The chatter of the birds filled their silence and they sipped on their drinks.

‘I’m so tempted to ask more about this saga up the hill.’

Britt began to stammer a response.

Gran put up her hand to stop her. ‘Don’t worry, I won’t nag you for details. I know it’s pri-vi-leged,’ she gave Britt’s hand a gentle pat in time to each syllable.

‘See, I still remember all the legal language from your Grandfather – *sub judice*. How’s that?’ she grinned and said it again. ‘*Sub judice*. I used to love Latin too you know. Goodness knows why us girls studied it in our day – not much use in the kitchen,’ she chuckled without malice, at peace with her life’s work. ‘Ooh, your Grandad would be so proud if he knew about you now. I’m going to boast all over the village tomorrow when I go for my morning stroll – my clever granddaughter, only twenty-seven and already fighting for the underdog. I’ll be a local celebrity.’ She turned to Britt and gave her a wink, ‘I’ll pretend to have the inside scoop. Even though you haven’t told me a thing. I’ll just say, “sorry, *sub judice*, *sub judice*”, and brag about you as they nag me.’

Gran’s cheeks had turned pink and her back had straightened.

‘Oh thank you for coming, my dear. It’s brightened my day. In fact, it’s brightened my year.’ Gran got up and took Britt’s glass from her and she looked taller as she stepped inside. Taller than fifteen minutes ago when Britt stood at her door. She called over her shoulder.

‘I always knew you’d do good things with that brilliant brain of yours. How lucky is that poor girl to have you on her side?’

CHAPTER 29

GRACE

A boxer doing a victory lap

Mac came to her classroom in the middle of the morning, apologised for interrupting and called her out the room. His worried, wordless expression said it all.

'You need to be there when Holly comes out … let's go. We'll arrange for someone to supervise your class.'

She gave her class instructions to read their setworks quietly until the bell went and left. As they walked together across to the Mem Hall, Mac phoned Mrs P and instructed her to put someone into bat in Grace's place. It was a relief that he was too busy organising to talk en route. What was there to say?

They passed a black Land Rover with tinted windows parked across the road from the entrance to the hall. Justice stood by the door in his guard's uniform. The door opened and he held it ajar. He kept his eyes downcast. Holly emerged first, accompanied by Tim. He fussed around her and spoke in rapid-fire sentences. She couldn't make out what he was saying. Their eyes met and Holly gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head.

'You okay?' asked Mac, at her side. She nodded.

Before Holly reached her, Duncan and a young woman – presumably the attorney – came through the hall doors. The Land Rover door opened and Duncan's father climbed out. He gestured with a shrug, as if to ask the verdict. Duncan grinned and gave his Dad a thumbs up. His father shook his balled fist several times, like a boxer doing a victory lap and he strode up to his son and the attorney. He smiled and slapped his son on the back and moved in to hug the young woman. She thrust out her hand stiffly to shake his.

Mac took charge as Holly and Tim approached. Grace tucked Holly under her arm and steered them away. She knew she was supposed to say something comforting or to protect her, but instead it seemed Holly was the comforter. She became aware of a small gathering of people as they walked off. A man pushed a microphone towards her.

'Mrs Weaver, do you have any comments for *The Witness*?' She gave a mute head-shake and waved him away.

Brad Hay stood among a crowd of boys they passed as they walked towards home. From the safety of his pack he gave her a sheepish grin and wave.

'Is that the best you can do, Brad?' Holly whispered.

Grace didn't want a spectacle – there'd been enough of those lately – yet she was relieved to hear words that sounded like the daughter she knew.

'Let's keep this civilised, my dear. Come now. Don't get yourself fussed,' Tim soothed as he ran alongside them. Mac kept a steadfast presence at their sides.

Brad stepped away from the huddle.

'C'mon Holly, I don't want to take sides. You're both my friends. I'm sorry this had to happen, but there are only two people who really know what happened on that night. I can't get involved.'

'Brad, perhaps now's not …' Grace began.

'It's okay Mum,' said Holly and her nails dug into Grace's arm.

He gave a nervous laugh and looked back to his friends for support. The shock of adrenalin that had spurred Holly's timid outburst seemed to have dissipated. She took in big gulps of air and mouthed, 'Sorry, Mum' at Grace. They walked on.

'So not my friend… one word: Complicit,' Holly muttered, only loud enough for her to hear. The journalist caught up with them again and, as they walked, held his microphone up to Mac and asked for his comments.

They stopped. Mac took the microphone.

'It wouldn't be appropriate for me to comment on this matter. I suggest you contact the Chairman of the Board of Governors, Mr Michael Townsend, to whom I tendered my resignation this morning with immediate effect.'

Gatherings of teachers and boys stood around in different clusters watching and saying nothing, as if at the scene of a car crash. She too felt like a helpless spectator. She saw Duncan's attorney speaking angrily to his father. Tim put his hand on her shoulder as if to calm her and she shrugged his arm off and rushed towards them. Duncan was in the group, looking at his shoes.

Holly turned at the sound of high heels tapping on the tar towards them. She pushed Grace forward and stepped behind her, as if to create a barrier between herself and the approaching attorney. The young woman addressed Holly over her shoulder.

'This is probably no consolation, but I am sorry for my part in this … this debacle. You're a brave girl, Holly ...' Then she turned to look at Mac.

'Mr Macdonald, you aren't the only person who is resigning today.'

'I can't forgive you ... not yet,' Holly stammered.

'Of course not,' she replied and turned to walk towards her car. She called over to the journalist.

‘Hey Matt, thanks for getting here … You know where to get me if you need to fill in any gaps on the details,’ and she gave a showy wave to Charles Chylde, just to make sure there was no doubt as to who was responsible for the media presence.

Mac and Tim drifted apart from them and made their way towards the school buildings. Grace kept her arm hooked through Holly’s and they walked across Kidd rugby field towards home. A silver outline of a plane arced above the bell tower. She steadied herself on the gatepost at the top of the driveway as she imagined her daughter, peering out the window of that plane and trying to make out this rooftop for the last time, en route to somewhere far away.

CHAPTER 30

HOLLY

Maybe the next girl will

They got home and she climbed onto Mum's bed. Mum joined her and they pulled the duvet over themselves. In those trials on TV the whole courtroom was always on the edge of their seats waiting for the verdict with a sense of mystery. Everyone sat glued wondering which way it would go, and hoping for the good guy to get off, or win, or whatever. It was nothing like that in real life. Maybe because she wasn't the good guy. Not even a good girl. But she knew that going in, so maybe that's why she wasn't surprised at the end. She sat there thinking, 'whatever', as the chairman used big words and long sentences that meant one thing. She lost, he won. Mum held her hand as they lay on the bed.

'I'm sorry, Hol, I never …'

'Not your fault, Mum.'

'But I should have anticipated …'

'We talked about the risks.'

'But I didn't expect it to end like this.'

'Like what? I knew we had lost. It was obvious. Didn't you see it coming?'

'Yes, but …' her voice croaked. Holly was surprised Mum still had tears to cry. Hers were spent. 'If you accuse someone of stealing and the lawyers can't prove the case for whatever reason, and the guy gets off, but the accuser still knows the thief did it, does the person who lays the charge of theft feel bad about what they've done when the accused gets off?'

'No,' she said, although she knew her mum didn't need a reply.

'If someone accuses a man of murder but he gets off, does the family of the dead guy lie awake afterwards feeling like they've sinned for making a murder accusation?' She didn't answer that question. They both knew what she meant. 'Is there any other criminal offence in the world where the accuser ends up feeling like the accused?'

'Mum, I get it. It's not fair, but we had to try. Can we stop now?'

'Did we have to try, Hol? Or should I say, did you? Because it turns out it was only you up there in the end. I didn't protect you. I'm your mother, and that's my main job.'

'Mum, I had to do it on my own. We talked about that too – you, me, Nana. It was my choice.'

'But I'm so angry with myself. Maybe it shouldn't have been your choice. You're seventeen. I'm supposed to know better.'

‘Well it happened, okay? I wish it hadn’t, but it did. I’ll survive this, somehow.’

‘That humiliation? You gained nothing.’

‘The humiliation happened anyway, with or without the hearing. Maybe the next girl will …’ she whispered and her thoughts turned to Melissa.

They lay there until the room was dark. Their conversation drifted to other things and they made peace with each other through silence. Her brothers came and joined them on the bed later, and slipped themselves in between. For once they hardly wriggled. T tucked himself under Holly’s arm and began to twist her hair through his hands, while G lay between Mum, and T tickled his fingers up and down her arm. At some point they all drifted into sleep.

That weekend people came and went through the house, dropping meals and flowers and drinking tea. It was like when Dad died. The same friends coming and going and showing ways of caring. At times Holly felt angry, and wondered where they’d been before. But she guessed it wasn’t their fight to fight. A few messages pinged on her cell phone that had been silent for the previous few weeks. If they really had something worthwhile to say, they’d persist with more messages, or pitch up in person, she reasoned, as she ticked the whole lot and hit the delete button without reading them. She felt too tired to care. Nana appeared at some point and spent most of the weekend in the background making food. Gogo moved about invisibly, clearing cups and washing up, and being her silent self. The house felt calm, and she even managed to sit at her desk and spend a few hours studying for the final exams that were now a week away.

On Sunday morning she woke early. Sarge looked confused when she appeared at his basket before dawn with her running shoes on. She realised it had been weeks since they’d run together. His tail slapped cautiously against the side of his basket as if to say, ‘are you sure?’

By the time she got to Beacons, the heat of the sun surprised her, and she felt its burn on her shoulders and face. She had forgotten to use sun cream. Mid-summer had arrived without her noticing this year. Her break from running meant she hadn’t mapped the change of seasons in her usual way.

She didn’t know how long she sat at Beacons with Sarge snuffling in the bushes, but at some point she came to a decision. This would be her last run there. Not forever, but for a long time. There was no big shift, no cog that ground and then clicked into place. She had hinted at the idea to Mum once or twice, as if to test how it sounded out loud, without really meaning it. Now a feeling of certainty came that it was time for her to leave for a while. She sat on the stone bench and watched the sun climb over Albert Falls Dam. It cast different

colours across the water and, as it shifted, each movement seemed to fill the water with more promise.

Sarge jogged obediently at her side all the way home. She wondered if his good behaviour was his attempt to persuade her to stay and do this run with him again every day, until forever. But it was time to go. Not that day, or even that month. She had matric to write first, and she didn't know where she would be going or what she was going to do. Probably not forever. But the lightness that she felt carried her home that day and through the month ahead, and to the end of her school career.

EPILOGUE

HOLLY

So many ways to say goodbye

The night before she leaves Mum warns her she's got work obligations, so she's arranged for Mkhulu to take her to Oribi airport in Pietermaritzburg. Mum has conjured all her reasons that she gives.

'Mkhulu could do with the money – the old man is bored stiff and looking for things to do. I need to finish writing reports and do all those end-of-year things, you know, tidy my classroom …'

They both know she could take the hour off to do the airport run, but Holly is grateful for Mum's excuses. She's saving them both from something they can't face. In her mind she practices holding it together when the moment comes. She doesn't know why, and she can't put words to it, but she knows their instinct is the same – that if Mum comes to see her off they will set each other going and there will be a big, messy, public melt-down in the airport. Somehow, with the drive to the airport between when she says goodbye and when she actually leaves town, there's a gap that looks wide enough for Holly to persuade herself that she won't sob. They are both happy to pretend that a goodbye in the driveway is the only way to do it. They spend the last twenty-four hours getting in each other's way as they sort her cupboards and clean shoes and iron clothes and pack, then repack, then weigh luggage, then agonise about what has to be excluded again and again so that her luggage isn't overweight. Mum tidies after her and they snarl at each other over small irritations, like the mess of the bathroom cupboard, and they dance around what they both want to say: 'I love you and I don't know how I'm going to leave you.'

On the morning of her departure she knows that Mkhulu is using Mum's car to drive her. Mum has gone to her classroom and she's ready and waiting with her suitcase loaded in the boot. She's checked her airticket again from Pietermaritzburg to Jo'burg, and the second ticket for later that night from Jo'burg to London. She keeps going into her backpack to check her passport and read her visa once more to ensure it doesn't have any mistakes. She's only just got her driver's license and she knows she won't have much use for it in England, so she's reversed the car out the garage and done her three point turn to face it up the driveway. There's nothing left to do, so she's ready and feeling agitated and irritable. A hot December Berg wind doesn't help her mood, and she has to remind herself that she should be grateful for the farmers, because that means it'll rain soon.

Mkhulu isn't there yet, so she decides to take the car for a last loop around Warrior's Way. Sarge jumps into the passenger seat and she winds down the window so he can rest his head on the door. His ears and lips flap softly as she picks up a bit of speed, and it looks as if he's smiling. The school is deserted now – all the boys have gone home for their Christmas holidays, and the maintenance men are erecting scaffolding around Graham House. She's not surprised to see no teachers. She knows they're either tidying and closing their classrooms down for the year, or planning family campouts at the Umgeni, or stocking up for weekends in the Berg as a family breakup treat.

As she passes each boarding house and considers Mum's Anglo-African landscape, she tries to imagine where she's going and how she will feel to wake every day to the sound of traffic instead of guinea fowl. She tells herself that it's a good thing she's lived in a mist belt – at least she's used to saggy skies. In the same thought she glances up to see the speck of a raptor circling on thermals against a clear, pale background. She thinks about what she's seen on Skype of her uncle's flat in London where she'll live, and she remembers Nana saying 'how posh', just as she was thinking, 'how small'. She thinks of parks and statues with pigeons eating damp breadcrumbs off the stone heads of grumpy Englishmen that mean nothing to her. She catches a glimpse of the valley and she tries to ignore her thoughts that drift towards what it will feel like to look out her window and see terraced housing instead of the little thatch roofs of the Teapots Valley.

She keeps driving and she slows as she approaches her Security Branch. It quivers. The branches are bouncing and she sees flashes of primary colours come and go as leaves part and close. She thinks of a Christmas tree and feels her heart shrink in her chest as she realises this will be the first time she won't be here to decorate theirs. Then she sees young members of the Barefoot Gang dangling from branches. She feels a moment of indignation that they've already claimed her tree and she hasn't even left yet.

As she drives closer she sees both her brothers chattering among hordes of arguing children – they're the most senior members now, so presumably they're negotiating new rules for their next game. She's tempted to stop and hug them and have one last goodbye. They each wave wildly with both hands – G wobbles slightly and she brakes quickly, worried he'll fall, but he rights his footing. T begins to chant, 'Bon Voyage, Bon Voyage, Bon Voyage …' and soon the troupe echoes him as they bounce in unison on the branches in time to their chant. She sees from G's expression that he's imploring her not to stop and get out. T turns his back and looks at the Nguni herd on the farm next door, and makes a quick swipe at

his eye with a balled fist. She slows, but doesn't stop, and she waves out the window and shouts back, 'Sala kahle Barefoots', and on she drives. Sarge barks.

She fiddles with the radio to distract herself and, as she rounds the bend near the McKenzie gates, she sees Justice in his red and black uniform walking down the middle of the road. He makes a gesture that is somewhere between an attempt to flag her down and a greeting wave. Sarge makes a soft whine and his tail thumps against the back of the seat as she stops.

'So you're leaving just now?'

'Yep, all packed and ready. Mkhulu's driving me … kind of him.'

'Yes, he told me.' She fiddles with a thread that is loose on the steering wheel upholstery. He, too, picks at invisible stitching on the sleeve of his uniform. He's sweating slightly.

'It can't be fun walking around in that uniform in this heat.' She hates her pathetic effort to fill the silence. Since when does she discuss the weather with Justice to fill awkwardness?

'I'm used to it. Not too bad. At least this means it'll rain.'

'The farmers will be pleased,' they say in unison, and they laugh a little then fall back into silence for what feels like hours.

'I heard they wanted to fire you?' she says.

'Yes, I hear so, but Mr Mac saved me. Before he left, he somehow persuaded them I should remain until the end of the month. He did that without my asking … a good man. But I need to be on best behaviour now,' he smiled, 'save up for Howard College.'

'I should thank you, or say sorry or, I dunno ...'

Justice waves the words away and says, 'me too', and they both stop talking.

She wonders if he's as conscious as she is that he's standing and sweating in the sun in a uniform on the other side of a car door to her, while she sits there in the driver's seat in the shade with an air ticket in her pocket. She wants to get out and stand next to him as they try to fumble their way through the end of a long overdue conversation. But she can't find a way to make the gesture seem natural and the idea even feels awkward while its forming in her head, so she knows it has no chance of coming out right. A bakkie drives towards them and she sees Justice stiffen slightly. It pulls up alongside Mum's car and Justice salutes Petrus Blom, the head of security.

'Wenzen janie? Everything all right here, Justice?'

'Everything's just fine, Sir,' he grins an only-teeth grin that doesn't move his eyes.

‘No slacking off now that it’s gone quiet, eh Justice? You must bega everything shap-shap,’ he shouts over his shoulder as he drives off. She is embarrassed by Blom’s fanagalo, but more embarrassed to witness Justice’s embarrassment.

‘I’d better go,’ he says.

‘Yep, me too,’ she says, and they begin a move to shake each other’s hands, but both their palms slacken and swivel as they touch, and instead their fingers interlock for a moment. She doesn’t know if what they have to say is impossible, or if it doesn’t need saying at all. But they squeeze each other’s fingers for a moment and she revs the engine and begins to pull off with one hand on the steering wheel. Their grips loosen and their palms unlock as she drives away.

‘Hamba kahle, my friend,’ he calls after her.

She doesn’t need to look into the rearview mirror to know he will watch her drive off until she is out of sight. She completes her Warrior’s Way loop to arrive back at home where Mkhulu is standing waiting outside the garage in his pressed khaki uniform. Mum comes out of the front door as she hears the car.

‘I was worried. You don’t have that much time,’ she says.

‘Sorry, just did a quick Warrior’s Way spin that took longer than I’d planned.’ They avoid eye contact.

‘Let’s get this over with,’ Holly volunteers, and she makes getting out the car and into a hug one fluid movement so that they don’t have to look at each other. They hold each other tight. She hears Mum’s rough, dry breaths and she doesn’t trust herself to say ‘please don’t cry’, so they fumble and break apart without words.

Mkhulu hesitates at the passenger door, then moves to open it and gestures to usher her onto the seat. She is surprised that he offers her the back seat.

‘So many ways to say goodbye,’ he says through a forced smile and makes a vague suggestion, ‘you’ll be more comfortable here.’

She knows he is saying it so she isn’t embarrassed to leave him alone upfront, like a bad scene from *Driving Miss Daisy*. She is grateful for his understanding that she needs to compose herself alone. He tucks a few tissues into her hand before closing the door behind him. She sees his face in the rearview mirror, but she knows he will only glance at her to check she’s okay once he is sure she has looked away. She can’t look out the windows, she can’t look back at Mum, so she pretends to sort through non-existent messages on her phone. The stripes of the wrought iron gates flick shadows across her screen as they pass, but she refuses to acknowledge them.

As the plane climbs and banks north-west, she stares out the window. Below her she makes out perfect white buildings set against green mowed spaces. Hill House presents itself as neatly as a spotless architectural model. It's like an estate agent's picture from a brochure of a millionaire's secure housing estate. The perimeter of the school is easy to see. There is a sharp line where the colour of the earth changes to a pale beige. The Midmar Dam is a thick, gravy brown, and the baked mud perimeter seems to creep inwards and shrink the dam to a puddle as she watches. To the east and the south of the dam, tin-roofed shacks simmer in groups and lean against each other as if melting. She recognises the playground of a primary school where she did her community service last year. A rubbish dump smoulders against the boundary fence of what she thinks is Mpophomeni Secondary School. On a sand soccer field she makes out a group of children chasing an invisible ball. Busy ants scurrying across an empty sugar bowl. The plane continues to climb. She takes a last look back to catch a tiny circle of green that shrinks into a dot that is then swallowed into a khaki version of a lunar landscape.

_____ THE END _____

ENTER THESE GATES …

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

BY

NICHOLA DOUGLAS ROY

In memory of Mark Behr
whose warm spirit and advice propelled me along my writing path.

There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all.

Ian McEwan, *Atonement*

It is no accident that my manuscript begins with a description of a car driving through an imposing pair of institutional wrought iron gates and that it ends in a similar way. I have always been conscious of my fascination with gatekeepers, so I knew that such characters would feature in my work, as would gates, in a literal and figurative sense. Of course I am not the first to identify how apposite gates and gatekeepers are as metaphors to writers.

I first describe the Hill House school gates and their gatekeeper in my prologue – coincidentally the very first sentences that I wrote towards my manuscript. Little did I know then that I would come to view my own journey towards a complete work as a figurative process of travelling through a variety of gates.[1]

Along the way I have studied gates and gatekeepers. Gatekeeping would seem to be a simple enough job – keeping the unwanted out – but gatekeepers have different ways of achieving this aim; they have an arsenal at their disposal. Some of the characters in my manuscript, Holly and Justice in particular, encounter their own cast of gatekeepers. I distinguish them from my own. In this essay I identify certain authorial choices that are influenced by my interpretation of ideas. These are separated and contemplated below as a series of gates. I present them in the order of the extent of their impact on my work. Thus these are my reflections on the openings, barriers, gates or thresholds through which I have passed on my Master of Arts (MA) travels.[2]

FEMINIST GATES

I am an ill-informed feminist. I have not read enough academic feminist theory and so I have disappointed myself by arriving in middle age without grappling with the subtleties of the different waves of feminism, despite all good intentions. So the best I can do is to describe

[1] In fact, upon sitting down to write this reflective essay, I now realise that the inscription that appears on the plaque of the McKenzie gates in the prologue to my manuscript – also a real plaque on a real South African school gatepost – serves as valuable advice, not only to schoolboys, but to a writer hoping to enter the world of writing: 'Enter these gates with humility, determined to contribute to, and to take advantage of, all that this institution offers, and depart knowing that you are well-equipped to forge your future in the world,' (Hodgson, J, plaque at McKenzie Gates, Hilton College, KwaZulu-Natal).

[2] The subtle distinctions implied by these different names for entrances are important to me. The obstacles I encountered, real or imagined, are too diverse and manifold for me to consider each one in this essay.

myself as a member of Caitlin Moran's 'incoming tide' of feminism (Moran 2012: 14).[3] I persuade myself that Moran's treatise, while not academic, is good enough for me, for now.[4]

It feels pretentious to describe my own work as feminist writing when, in an academic sense, I am not sure what that means. I am aware that radical feminists would be appalled by an imposter like myself presuming to represent any astute views on the subject. Nevertheless, I must acknowledge that my writing concerns itself with feminism because I have made a deliberate decision to tackle the complicated and difficult topic of rape. I do so because I want certain issues around the subject to become accessible to a new audience – to non-academics – through fiction writing.

I have remained fixed on the fact that at the centre of my project lies my horror at South Africa's rape statistics.[5] Within this realm exists my preoccupation with the injustices around how rape is handled within the justice system. Thus I hope that my writing asks readers to contemplate a rape victim's feelings of guilt – such a deeply private shame – and how this is expected to become a public experience as soon as a rape is alleged. I hope my work will insist that readers consider the trauma of this devastatingly prejudicial contrast. I wish them to consider the cruel fact that date rape, in particular, is accompanied by brutal public speculation and scepticism.

---

[3] Moran states, 'I don't know if we talk about "waves" of feminism any more – by my reckoning, the next wave would be the fifth, and I suspect it's around the fifth wave that you stop referring to individual waves, and start to refer, simply, to an incoming tide.'.

[4] Moran's writing has provided me with accessible definitions and insights into feminism that are simultaneously laugh-out-loud funny. I can see that her definition is problematic in an academic sense, but this resonates with my simple instinct for what a woman being on the side of women means: 'But, of course, you might be asking yourself, "Am I a feminist? I might not be. I don't know! I still don't know what it is! I'm too knackered and confused to work it out. That curtain pole really still isn't up! I don't have time to work out if I am a women's libber! There seems to be a lot to it. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"
I understand.
So here is the quick way of working out if you're a feminist. Put your hand in your pants.
a) Do you have a vagina? and
b) Do you want to be in charge of it?
If you said 'yes' to both, then congratulations! You're a feminist' (Moran 2012: 79-80).

[5] I am equally concerned with insidious displays of misogyny that subtly disempower women, and of course these practices are linked. Thus I include sub-plots that describe various women's sexist encounters that, in some instances, have a different, but sometimes comparably damaging effect to the psychic violence of rape.

I am profoundly influenced by Pumla Gqola's work *Rape, A South African Nightmare.* Gqola writes, 'Sometimes rape leaves bruises on skin, cuts, tears. Sometimes it leaves invisible scars only. The body that seems whole, then, can work against the experience of violation narrated by the violated woman' (Gqola 2015: 29). It is into this space that I hope to write – that the process of narrating the rape event in legal proceedings or elsewhere is, in effect, a second violation, that may be as traumatic as the first, and sometimes more so. It is always deeply humiliating, regardless of the outcome of a trial.

As I approach the conclusion of my project, the #MeToo movement floods the media. I am hopeful that this movement has and will continue to result in a significant shift in attitudes towards sexual abuse and rape. I was aware that encounters like the tryst I describe in my work are common.[6] Yet I become appalled and enraged that, in the time that it has taken me to write my manuscript, I lose count of the number of reported scandals that resemble my fictional account too closely.[7]

Like all campaigns that play themselves out on social media and gather momentum – arguably the most effective way to start a political movement in the 21st century – this movement seems problematic in parts. I have become aware of #MeToo disciples whose claims seem sensationalist and accusatory, while being scant on detail. As someone who has practised as an attorney, this bothers me. The movement sometimes feels like it is at risk of being hijacked by attention-seeking celebrities looking for sound-bytes. I am also aware that to include reference to the movement in my manuscript makes me appear as a time-server. Yet if I exclude any reference to the movement, it feels as if I am writing in vacuous oblivion of the context and time of my story. I am conflicted in my scepticism towards the #MeToo movement and I sometimes feel hypocritical in my observations that find their way into my manuscript. Because I've found this dilemma distracting to my writing, although there is some reference to the #MeToo movement in my work, I have avoided engaging too closely

[6] Gqola warns me with these words, 'Survivors of gender-based violence are the world's majority; they walk the streets all day everywhere, sit next to you in class, they are the person you are busy falling in love with, they are your sister, your best friend, lover, mother, daughter, your teacher' (2012: 151).

[7] I give closer consideration below, under the sub-heading, 'Gates between fact and fiction', to specific events that have affected my writing and my understanding of private and public perceptions of rape. The incidents I reflect on have been widely reported in various media, and the ones I have chosen to consider are just a few of many similar scandals. Beyond those exposed scandals, though, it is abhorrent to imagine how many other incidents have gone and still go unreported.

with the issues that surround it. A number of people have suggested to me that interest in my manuscript is bound to exist as a result of the #MeToo movement and the frequency of sex scandals within schools and universities. They have urged me to ride this wave of interest and use it to appeal to publishers, suggesting I should be delighted by its advent. I am deeply uncomfortable with such opportunism.

When I visualise the structure of my manuscript, in a physical sense, I imagine a pond where a stone – the rape – has been dropped into the middle, and has disappeared, but which has caused ripples in concentric rings that make their way to the edge. I want the story to reflect the inevitable silences that surround the rape, in between the din of conversations that follow the rape and its aftermath. In my writing process I discover that Holly, as a young victim of gender violence, is a political hot potato, which I had not anticipated.[8] I specifically want the physical experience of Holly's rape to be nuanced and not to be overtly violent. I expect there may be readers who will feel that Holly even carries some blame. Of course the suggestion of blameworthiness flies in the face of feminist expectations of what my writing should say, yet I want the complexity of this debate for my story.[9] I want the subject of rape in all its forms to be demystified and the myths that surround it to be debunked and debated. In particular, I want the subject debated by teenagers and young people who are learning to navigate their way into the difficult realm of sex and sexual consent. I hope that I have left enough room for discussion in my narrative to ensure conversations and arguments around rape are had, because that is how education on the topic begins. I do not want didacticism in my writing and I am adamant that the interactive process between reader and writer means I have to leave some readers to draw conclusions around gender violence that I abhor. I can only hope that, in spite of this, my project at least achieves an increased understanding in place of confusion about rape, and increased compassion and sensitivity in place of disdain for rape victims.

[8] I became conscious of a strange irony in my MA group's reaction to two of the voices in the novel. For Justice's voice it was suggested that the tone of political correctness harms his authenticity – which, when pointed out to me through specific examples in my writing, became obvious. Yet in Holly's voice, the group felt that the writing is not always politically correct enough.

[9] Gqola is clear on her disdain for ever placing blame on a rape victim, which I agree with without reservation: 'When we are the kind of women who never believe a girl or another woman's narrative of rape, or believe her but tell her to keep quiet anyway because her story will embarrass him and/or us, we are complicit with the siege under which we live' (2012: 68)

I know Holly well. She is a girl who is moved, for better or worse, by words, and not physical acts. She is physically tough and can take a lot of physical damage, but emotionally she is vulnerable and thin-skinned. She masks her emotional sensitivity with a carelessness and bravado – a typical teenage reaction – 'whatever'. Yet some of Holly's reactions seem to have worried some of my readers in the MA seminars, and I find this frustrating.[10] In response to my frustration, an interesting discussion resulted, which felt like a breakthrough discovery, assisting my writing in many instances: It is irrelevant whether I, the writer, know that the reality is as I describe it; It is whether I have made it believable to someone who has never been in my context that matters most; my job is to make it credible and real to someone who has never seen the setting I describe, and doesn't know the characters the way I do. It is ironic for me that Gqola's observation of how rape is perceived reinforces this view, yet complicates my task as a writer: 'The closer her story is to our preconceived ideas about what rape looks like,' she writes, 'the more likely we are to believe she is telling the truth' (Gqola 2012: 29). I wish to challenge preconceptions about rape in my work and I know I will struggle until the end of my MA to achieve the balance between what my readers expect Holly to say and feel, and what I know feels true to who she is.

I am also influenced by the words of Toni Morrison when she describes the process of writing the scene of Sethe killing Beloved. 'I thought that the act itself had to be not only buried but also understated, because if the language was going to compete with the violence itself it would be obscene or pornographic' (Morrison quoted in Wagner-Martin 2015: 62). I know that Holly will obliterate the thought of her unwanted vaginal penetration. But the thought of parts of someone else's body being forced into her mouth would be the worst physical violation for Holly. She is a sassy, mouthy girl and a physical muzzling or stifling of her words would have the similar, metaphoric effect on her. Thus the most excruciating sentence to write in my work was, 'She remembered those fingers in her mouth, dry and bony'. The remainder of Holly's account of her rape is couched in euphemisms, silences and avoidance of detailed descriptions. She answers questions, as she must, but volunteers nothing additional. These are her responses because her shame is too profound to say it in any other way. That single sentence in my manuscript is the only thought – not even expressed in spoken words by Holly – that describes her sense of physical violation. Not unlike Morrison,

[10] I struggled to understand why certain members of the group want a more explicit narration of Holly's experience. I am confident that I know Holly's interiority and how reluctantly she would express her sense of shame and trauma.

I am deeply concerned that the language here could be competing with the violence itself and it is, to me, as close to pornographic as my writing gets.[11] Barbara Kingsolver recounts an occasion when she found the writing process to be traumatic. She explains her dread at writing the scene of a baby's death in *The Poisonwood Bible* until it was unavoidable, and how she wept on the days when she wrestled with this passage and its language.[12] My experience resonates entirely with hers.

POV GATES

Early on in my MA, I expressed my anxiety around point of view (POV) and the question of who has the right to tell whose story. This is obviously linked to questions around the ethics and effects of cultural appropriation on art. It is not a new debate, but I suspect it will always remain a politically sensitive one. I am reluctant to even describe this as a form of gatekeeping because of how politically incorrect this sounds. However, it was interesting to discover that I am not the first to perceive it as a form of gatekeeping.[13] At the same time as I was confronting the implications of this question for my own work, Lionel Shriver's arguably crass reaction to the question in 2016 reignited the debate.[14] Her heavy-handed response does little to advance the discussion and her aggression comes across as simultaneously racist and defensive and, to my mind, she sets the conversation back.

---

[11] It is for this reason that I cannot allow Holly to make a prepared statement about the rape. I do not want the details of the physical acts to be spelled out in an orderly, logical fashion. As the writer, when I ventured into that idea, I felt salacious. It was put to me that the likelihood of Holly losing her statement was implausible. I concede this may be the case, but I am satisfied that this is the less problematic option. I concluded that I will willingly accept criticism for implausible writing before I will allow Holly's rape to be the subject of prurient curiosity. I became more resolute when I read a new work that is receiving positive reviews and good critical acclaim, *Peach*, by Emma Glass. I can see that the writing is good and effective, but it is also violent and explicit and trying to achieve a different result to what I want for my project.

[12] I attended a book talk in February 2015 where Kingsolver was interviewed by Pippa Smith of the *Book Revue*, and I put a question to her from the floor.

[13] Kenan Malik's treatise (2017) on this subject is an instructive and new perspective for me. It deals with the question of the impact of cultural appropriation on art more broadly, and visual art in particular, rather than specifically on literature. This offers a slightly different insight to those of writers. He states, 'What really lies behind the debate about cultural appropriation is not ownership but gatekeeping – the making of rules or an etiquette to determine how a particular cultural form may be used and by whom.'

[14] Her article (2016) in which she defends the right for anyone to write seems deliberately offensive at times, for example, 'So it's more than possible that we write from the perspective of a one-legged lesbian from Afghanistan'.

In the meantime, while presenting work on a regular basis at MA seminars, and after one submission that I was reasonably satisfied with, it was suggested to me that I have 'affirmative action anxiety' (AAA). I was indignant: Justice is not simply a BEE appointment to my story. Justice has a critical role in my plot. I also wish to reflect on how racial and gender prejudice work in similar ways. As Shailja Patel writes, 'If you want to understand how power works in society, watch who is carrying the shame and who is doing the shaming' (Patel quoted in Gqola 2012: 38). Thus Justice is also central to the thematic purpose of my story. I presumed that the person intimating this was suggesting that I do not have the right to write in the voice of a young, rural, black male, or worse still that my writing is racist. I turned to Mark Behr, who was a visiting member of the faculty at the time, for advice. I received these words from him in an email:

> You are a writer. Your job is to imagine, to write and to write well. That's all. This means making this … character three dimensional. He is not simply black and not simply a victim: we are all infinitely more than our so-called race or the sum of our suffering: class, race, gender, familial affiliations; sibling rivalries and loves, sexuality, sexual orientation, ability, personal history, taste, anger, love, joy, indifference, frustration, hope, yearning, ambition, hate, forgiveness, compassion, envy, our responses to the scent of frangipani …'[15]

Behr's advice allowed me to feel vindicated and righteous about proceeding. Only later did I process that Behr's words served my purpose, which was why I am so aligned to his thoughts. It took introspection and time for me to realise that Behr and my AAA accuser were saying almost the same thing. I understood this when I found further arguments in support of Behr's views that all emphasised that the right to write on anyone's behalf comes with a proviso: it must be done with humility.[16]

---

[15] I attach a full transcript of the correspondence between me and the late Mark Behr as an addendum to this essay because this email went onto a pin-board at my desk where I write. His words served as an inspiration to me, as he was to so many writing students, before he died.

[16] To me this is the essence of what is articulated by Kamila Hari Kunzra and Kamila Shamsie in their *Guardian* article (2016), 'Whose life is it anyway? Novelists have their say on cultural appropriation'. I considered all of these observations to be sufficiently different to cite both of them, and I have frequently returned to all of their words as I consider POV. Kunzra says, 'Good writers transgress without transgressing, in part because they are humble about what they do not know. They treat their own experience of the world as provisional. They do not presume. They respect people, not by leaving them in the inviolability of their cultural authenticity, but by becoming involved with them … they engage in reciprocal relationships'. Shamsie defends a novel written by a non-Pakistani, Peter Hobbs, about a

It is tempting to draw only on the views of noted international writers as defences to my right to write the story I am interested in. But, as a white South African, it is disingenuous to ignore the views of black South Africans on this debate. If I am going to exercise humility in this process – what I now understand is imperative if my writing is going to be any good – I have to acknowledge our country's unique history and my part in its wounds, and how this alters the debate. I consider the furore over John Trengove's film, *Inxeba* (known internationally as *The Wound*). Lwando Xaso and Zukiswa Pikoli write that '[i]t is not okay to subjectively delve into traditions and practices you are not a part of under the guise of sparking debate or engagement. It is not your place because you are not speaking as a member of that society … Telling our stories through a white lens ensures the dominance and centrality of whiteness'.[17] Achille Mbembe does not refute this argument entirely, but I do take some comfort from his words:

> The disciplines of the humanities are about looking at your face and seeing my face in yours. They are about that question of encounter, empathy and fundamental similarity, and mutual understanding … When you have students telling you … I don't want to read a dead white man's book and you ask them why … and they tell you because I don't recognise myself in that … it makes me uncomfortable … in the sense that reading is not about finding myself, reading in its true sense is getting out of myself and projecting myself onto the road to meet someone whom I might recognise …[18]

I have resolved that it is essential for good writing, like good reading, to be a process of 'getting out of myself'. But I also understand that whatever defence I offer for writing this manuscript, with all its voices and its characters, it will be an inadequate response with some flawed logic and solipsism. Ian McEwan's (2016) words remind me: '… no atonement … for novelists.'

At last, rightly or wrongly, I have granted myself permission to write from any point of view I choose, holding onto Stella Duffy's caveat that: 'We can write who we are not and do it

---

Pakistani world: '[I]t has no interest in peddling stereotypes or making great claims about the place in which it is located; there is no whiff of arrogance or entitlement, I don't know what went on in Hobbs's mind when he wrote it but I feel fairly confident it wasn't: "How dare anyone dispute my right to write this?"'

[17] Xaso, L & Pikoli, Z. 'Trengove has no right making a movie about us.' *IOL News*. 19 March, 2017. Accessed at https://www.iol.co.za/news/opinion/trengove-had-no-right-making-a-movie-about-us-8256194.

[18] Mbembe, A. Interview: The end of public universities in South Africa? http://www.litnet.co.za/interview-the-end-of-public-universities-in-south-africa/

well if we write with passion, strength – and care. We're bound to get it wrong sometimes, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try' (Duffy in Kunzru et al 2016)

Then the hard work began – the doing-it-well bit, or at least an attempt at this. One of my decisions that made me feel I could achieve a truer voice for the characters that were removed from my reality, was to write them from a third-person-attached POV. In the first-person POV there is an immediacy that requires me to write every word of each character using their personal verbal tics and vocabulary. To complicate matters further, a number of my characters are teenagers or not mother-tongue English speakers, so the idea of ensuring every word sounds like theirs is intimidating.[19] When writing in the first person I found myself too pre-occupied by the sound of the characters and became aware that I needed to focus instead on whether I was accurately representing their thoughts. In a third-person-attached POV I felt there was a little more space to access a character's interiority and to sometimes describe it in a more universal and neutral way that does not always need to mimic a character's speech patterns so precisely. As I began to reach this conclusion, I finally felt as if I was getting somewhere.

I began to write from a few perspectives – initially Holly's, Duncan's and Justice's – becoming increasingly aware of the value of additional perspectives for my narrative. I read *A Strangeness in My Mind* by Orhan Pamuk, and wondered if there had ever been more perspectives reflected in one novel. The effect of Pamuk's polyphonic cacophony is exciting; it gives a sense of Istanbul's unresolved troubles, its complexity and its layered history. I began to see how a similar idea would add value to my work – I wanted opposing conversations around gender violence and date rape to be represented and defended. But I was also mindful of the distractions of what James Wood (2008: 115) describes as 'the massive turbines of incessant story-making [that] make so much noise that no-one can be heard.' I noted that carefully crafting a quiet story is necessary if I am to ensure my characters are remembered as the central features of my work. I nervously raised the idea of adding other voices to my story at a seminar. I was told, by someone at the MA seminar, 'but you're not Orhan Pamuk'!

[19] I cover my detailed concerns around this in more detail under the sub-heading, 'Teenage gates'.

It was tempting to take this comment to heart and be dissuaded from the idea. And I was of course annoyed and wounded once again at the suggestion that I am not up to the task, but I have identified that over-sensitivity to criticism does not make a good writer and instead I chose to consider the observation to be grist to my mill. Then I came across this argument from Chris Cleave (in Kunzra et al 2016):

> 'In my novels I cross boundaries … That's the best way I know to tell stories about our world, where those faultlines define our society… I show scenes from both sides, using one character to view another askance. Why? Because my characters' eyes are sharper than mine, since my own identity has no lock on a unitary or objective way of seeing things.'

I am certainly no Orhan Pamuk, and nor am I Chris Cleave. It is ambitious to take on the number of points of view that I do and I know that I capture certain character's thoughts better than others.

At the same time, I became captivated by characters' names in many fictional works, particularly those of an allegorical nature. My narrative cannot ignore the wonderful implications in the abstract nouns that become the names of traditional working class black South Africans.[20] I consider David Lodge (1992: 37) to have given me license to tinker away at names by saying, 'Comic, satiric or didactic writers can afford to be exuberantly inventive, or obviously allegorical in their naming.' While I do not expect to be classed with any of these writers, I've nevertheless granted myself permission to create outlandish names from my knowledge that in a boarding school context there is no such thing as a name that is too ridiculous to be unreal.

As I began coming to terms with the ethics of writing from a variety of POVs and telling a range of characters' stories, I also resolved that a certain degree of activism is required by me, alongside my writing process, which feels necessary in defence of my right to write from various perspectives. On occasions it was suggested, and once even asked of me directly, whether I had personally encountered sexual violence or rape. The implication seemed to be that I could only write effectively on the topic if this was the case. I decided that I would not be drawn on the question of whether I am writing from personal experience or not when I

[20] Deliberately exaggerated versions of this practice achieve delightful results as is demonstrated to me in Noviolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*.

write about rape. To do so would be to become a most insidious type of gatekeeper, and it would suggest that I might only enter those gates as a member of a club that nobody, in their worst nightmares, would wish to be a part of. I haven't examined the reasons for my indignation too closely, I know only that the suggestion offends me. The implication that whether I have or haven't been raped and therefore can or cannot write on the subject strikes me as insulting to all writers who have ever written on the subject. It suggests the writing will lack sufficient empathy or imagination to do the subject justice unless the writer has been raped and this returns me to the gates that obstruct the right to write from any perspective. On the other hand, if a writer admits to being raped, it feels uncomfortably voyeuristic to me for a reader to need to know this in order to find the work compelling. I don't care if the conclusion some may draw is that I am being hypocritical because I won't admit to being raped, perhaps because I have some sort of shame to hide, yet I am willing to write with outrage about rape.[21] I am resolved that neither an admission or a denial of rape will do the feminist movement, the cultural appropriation (and POV) debate, my writing, or the reception of my writing by readers, any good.

In the process of wrestling with these decisions I have been overwhelmed at times by my responsibility to depict each character truly, and I've cursed my decision to overly complicate my job as a writer by writing in many voices. But I have been simultaneously reminded that a range of POVs will better serve my purpose of depicting contradictory views on the rape narrative. Gqola's research into rape myths provided me with examples of the types of views that need representation: 'The police officer's speech bubble says, "If you want to survive a rape, don't fight back." The lawyer's bubble says, "If you don't fight back, you must have wanted it"' (2012: 146). I also know that I needed different characters to explain perspectives that Holly would never know or have the maturity to articulate.[22] I realised that I needed to depict a lawyerly voice and technical legal jargon in a different voice to Holly's.[23] It is only

[21] It interests me that Gqola encounters something similar, yet different: it is suggested to her by a friend that an op-ed she wrote leads to a perception that she is a rape survivor and that this in turn casts doubt on her objectivity. The suggestion is that this experience leads to unreliability. Perhaps incorrectly, my expectation of reactions that lead to my vow of silence, is that if I have been raped my writing will be more credible than if I haven't. Gqola's observation that explains these concerns to me is, 'The dominant script on rape inverts the usual expectations'(2012: 28).

[23] Brahm Fleisch was generous in sharing his expertise on school disciplinary enquiries with me. I have some experience in this field, but am indebted to Prof Fleisch for his insights that I tried to ensure were carried into my manuscript in the right voices in order for the legalities to be portrayed believably. For the

through a range of characters that I can reflect my own legal knowledge of how complicated and fraught the process of a hearing of this nature is, particularly against the background of a conservative institution that has its own reputation to protect.

In my process of learning to write in multiple POVs I've learnt again from Barbara Kingsolver: 'How do you ensure that your own narrative voice doesn't creep into the voices of your characters?' Her response: 'When you enter your writing room, leave yourself outside the door. Sit still and listen to your characters. They will tell you what they want to say.'[24] It sounded like hocus pocus to me. My characters are almost all based on people I know, or think I know, and I believe I can anticipate their responses. But I remained conscious of Kingsolver's advice. It took a while and then a curious thing happened – the logical part of me cannot explain it, and I feel slightly embarrassed to admit it – over a few years of living with my characters in my writing room, I have come to believe that they have thoughts and feelings and plans of their own.[25] It has been the oddest thing to sit at my writing desk with one plan for a character and to find, a few hours later, that he or she sends me in a different direction and says things that surprise me or things I do not like. The more I trusted and believed in that, the more it seemed to happen. I wondered if this could be the muse that writers speak of. I've tried to make sense of this phenomenon by researching it a little, and have discovered various propositions.[26] The academic explanations of the muse

---

purposes of plot plausibility, it was important that I explain how Holly's allegation is considered in a school disciplinary enquiry as opposed to a criminal trial. This would be considered as an unusual, but possible, legal tactic in a private school for all interested parties. Holly and Grace are both too traumatised to accurately repeat or remember the technical details, nor do they particularly care about them; they simply seek justice in whatever form this takes.

[24] My question from the floor answered by Kingsolver during a book talk in February 2015.

[25] I was a child with imaginary friends who went by names such as Kenny Penny and Brossel. I spoke to them for hours on the party line, much to the annoyance of the exchange operator. This experience makes me strangely reminiscent of my peculiarity that I had forgotten about. Perhaps this is why the muse notion fascinates me so.

[26] Katherine Coles (2013: 168) explains two schools of thought on this notion. One school believes, 'I only write when I'm inspired', in the Wordsworthian sense, and suggests that 'we might think of ourselves as being still in the very long Romantic period' – which I find entirely plausible; I am a long-distance runner and my own writing experience tells me that my best writing comes after I have enjoyed a trail run and had an idea as I drag myself up mountains or through green spaces. But I am also persuaded by the more logical argument that writers develop 'through constant media exposure, the writer channels not only the muse but texts of all kinds, language and images as they come to him already in use. A kind of gadfly to intertextuality'.

concept are fascinating, but I have had to leave them aside because they are not central to my work and, instead, I've decided to go with whatever this phenomenon is and trust it.

I accept that I may even miss or misrepresent the ideas of a character or two. Yes, of course 'getting a character in' (Wood 2008: 76) would be simpler if I only had one voice to worry about, but I know I need the polyphonia if I am to honour my reasons for choosing to write this story. As the writing process has progressed, so my conviction has become stronger and stronger that this ambitious decision is essential for my work to become what I want it to be.

TEENAGE GATES

It is a strange thing for a mother of three teenagers and a teacher of teenagers to admit to concerns about depicting teenage characters. I probably know more about such characters than the remainder of the cast of my manuscript. But if I have learnt anything about teenagers it is that they are aggressive, territorial gatekeepers who take their job extremely seriously. Nobody will get through teenage gates if they are not wanted!

The first weapon in a teenage gatekeeper's arsenal is his or her language. David Lodge (1992: 18-20) comments that 'Teenagers and criminals alike use slang as a tribal shibboleth, to distinguish themselves from adult, respectable society.'[27] I am mindful of the advice from Wood (2008: 77) who says, 'We can tell a great deal from a character by how he talks, whom he talks to – how he bumps up against the world.' It is for this reason that I've needed to attempt the point of view of these characters to be depicted in what Lodge (1992: 18-20) describes as 'teenage skaz', a literary device used 'to designate a type of first-person narration that has the characteristics of the spoken rather than the written word'.

I have a love-hate relationship with teenage slang. At its best, it is witty and current – like Cockney. At it's worst it is repetitive and becomes a bad habit and a verbal crutch for want of a more articulate way of saying things. In my daily world, away from my writing desk, I delight my students and annoy my children by trying their own language out on them, teasing

[27] I have re-read Lodge's chapter, 'Teenage Skaz', again and again, each time drawing on its masterful observations that I feel have led to incremental improvements in the tone of my teenage voices.

them and debating the value of the way they say things, with them. So I speak a little of the *lingua franca* of KwaZulu-Natal boarding school teenagers.[28]

In my project proposal I wrote, 'I anticipate that I may find that the process of writing almost the entire novel in slangy speech may become dull for both me and the reader, after all it can be tedious enough listening to teenagers speak for limited periods of time. Fortunately, my own experience and research suggests to me that amongst scholars from elite schools there appears to be snobbery towards speech that is littered with slang, abbreviations, incorrect grammar and highly stylised language. Thus teenagers from these environments try to differentiate themselves from others by using a slightly more formal register and more sophisticated diction with less slang. Alongside this they use extremely localised dialectical innovations, sometimes to good comic effect. The process of coming to grips with the correct diction and tone to accurately capture my teenage voices is certain to alleviate my boredom, if not the reader's. I also need to remain mindful that readers are unlikely to have my understanding of the region and attendant speech habits and so may be unaware of the dialectical shifts and snobberies. All of these subtleties present me with linguistic challenges that I am eager to attempt. Salinger's Holden Caulfield remains the literary poster boy of skaz for me; the fact that he was my first fictional love, as a teenager myself, certainly has something to do with my own determination to create my own fictional teenagers with their own form of skaz, who may find their own set of groupies.'

I have enlisted the advice of various teenagers (and young adults) to ensure the sound of my teenage voices are 'on point', as they would say.[29] And I tested some of the phraseology on my teenage consultants again on completion of my manuscript. I find the linguistic reality of some words having perpetuated, while others have become outdated and in need of adjustment, to be intriguing.

---

[28] Of course this is different to being able to write it, as every new student to a language knows.

[29] I repeatedly sought my twenty-year-old daughter's advice on the tone of my attempts at teen skaz (I resolved that at her age she still speaks fluent teen and as an undergraduate majoring in Linguistics and English, she is able to understand my concerns over the nuances of different registers and diction of teenagers). It is also my daughter who reminded me that Holly, as a daughter of an English teacher, would not be allowed to speak broad slangy street English – she has close personal experience. As I was persuaded by her thoughts, I realise of course why I would be, since they made my job easier than if I had to write in broad South African teenage slang all the time. I checked her insights against the views of some of my students to verify that my primary teenage slang advisor is accurate in her translations.

There is another linguistic phenomenon that makes writing in teen skaz more difficult than it was in Salinger's day: Social media has accelerated the rate of change of teen language. For teenage language to remain edgy and innovative, it is essential that the teenage voices remain on trend (or 'sick', to coin this month's term that is used to define what last month may have been described as 'cool'). The fluidity of teen language is what makes it so lively and fascinating, but it is obvious that using teen slang also runs the risk of the project sounding outdated and off-key by the time it is complete, let alone published. However, I am also aware that if I'd avoided teenage slang altogether, my writing would sound tone-deaf. I've known what not to do, but I've not necessarily always been sure what to do in its place.

A thematic concern in my work explores the tragic consequences of silences, misinterpretation and a lack of understanding between characters from different backgrounds.[30] Thus it felt apt to include Justice's dialogue with his Gogo in Zulu. I was inspired by these words from JM Coetzee's *Disgrace* (2000: 117) that find bearing in this regard: 'He would not mind hearing Petrus' story one day. But preferably not reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa'. I was also intrigued by the intimidating and alienating effect on me, as a non-Zulu speaker, of untranslated Zulu in Craig Higginson's *Dream House*, which led to my decision to attempt some Zulu dialogue in my writing.[31] After all, Justice's Gogo insists that he must speak to her in his mother tongue so that he feels proud of it. The responses in the MA seminars to my early attempts were favourable.[32] Of course I have similar concerns with

[30] Anecdotally, I wish to relay that my teenage students are excited and flattered that I am keen to learn a bit of their language. They have been eager to teach me, and have become more willing to learn my register. This is an unexpected bonus for me as a teacher, and an affirmation of my long-held belief that it is essential for people to attempt each other's languages if we are to truly understand one another.

[31] While I've similarly been tempted to leave the Zulu untranslated to achieve my objective of giving readers a true sense of how much they are missing by not understanding, I was concerned this would appear gimmicky, and a copycat of Higginson's idea. I've also had to remind myself that my job as a writer is to communicate my message clearly, not obfuscate it. I've fiddled with different ways of reflecting the translated words – footnotes or an appendix were a consideration, but seemed clumsy and the physical exercise of shifting between the two languages in different spaces interrupted the flow of the story. In the end I settled for Khaled Hosseini's style of translation in *The Kite Runner* – immediately accessible, but at the same time, by the foreign words appearing immediately alongside the English words, there is a constant reminder that this is an artificial construct.

[32] Although there was a suggestion from one person that enlisting the assistance of an outsider to translate my English would be problematic because then this would no longer be my work, I chose to ignore this concern and disregard it as poorly disguised gatekeeping. My conscience is clear, especially in

the tone, diction and register of Justice's Zulu as I have around the situational accuracy of all the teenage English dialogue in the manuscript. I considered my choice of translator with care and eventually enlisted the help of someone suitable to translate the dialogue from English into Zulu.[33] His advice and assistance was invaluable and went beyond what I had originally planned. I am entirely satisfied that I could not have chosen a better translator. In short, my own experience and my informal, unscientific research has given me sufficient reassurance to try to capture some level of teenage slang and the intonations of teenage voices from different backgrounds. This part of my writing journey has been a challenging but fun tightrope-walk between making my teenagers sound the right age and credible in the context of my story, whilst also remembering that I hope for my writing to sustain itself into the future and have a timeless and universal tone to it too.

A further weapon in the arsenal of teen gatekeepers is social media, and the use thereof is in fact central to my plot. Thus it is a gate that both I as writer, and certain of my characters, have needed to navigate together. The extent of reputational damage via broadly used social media has obviously escalated. It is a contemporary certainty that a teenage girl who has a brush with any form of sexual scandal has the fallout on social media to contend with. This escalates reputational damage to a level my generation can hardly contemplate. But these are the aspects of social media that my characters need to understand, not me. I have an attendant concern as a person who is not a habitual social media user, and without extensive knowledge of the different social media platforms: I am concerned with how accurately I depict the usage patterns of social media for my teenage characters. How heavily would they rely on social media as a platform in the circumstances of my plot, and which platforms would they

---

consideration of the many famous novels that are translated, yet still acknowledged as the work of the original writer.

[33] Sabelo Xulu, like my daughter, was recently a teenager and is familiar with the spoken Zulu of the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. He, like Justice, grew up as non-mother tongue English speaker. He was schooled in an elite Midlands boarding school environment and, I believe, understands the nuances and dialectical differences between Zulu as an academic subject and the way that it is spoken regionally. Furthermore, like Justice hopes to be, Sabelo is a graduate. It intrigues me that, unsolicited, Sabelo volunteers a similar view to my daughter: Justice's English, like his own, would tend to be formal and his use of slang relatively limited to the English of other rural, black Zulu speakers of a similar age, based on the way I describe Justice to him, and the circumstances of my story. Sabelo went even further to check in with his parents, who speak a more traditional form of Zulu to him, to ensure that the translations of Gogo and Aggie's conversations are accurate representations. Again, this engagement with Sabelo over his language affirms my view that attempts, however clumsy, to cross language barriers yield unexpected, wonderful social results.

use for which type of communication? The teenage obsession with the various forms needed be depicted accurately, yet this was also something that changed too rapidly for me to keep up with in my writing – the platform of choice, like their language, changes so fast. I also did not wish to pepper my writing with too much social media use because I concluded that, as much as it is a reality, there is surely only so much that is interesting to be said about this tedious teenage practice?

SCHOOL GATES

John Warner (2016) suggests that 'Just about anyone who can read, has read a boarding school novel … As long as most of us have our noses pressed to the gates, writers will need to let us inside'. This observation has allowed me to believe there is perhaps space for yet another novel in this genre – the urge to capitalise on the strong, divided opinions held about these institutions is compelling for me as a writer, and also as a teacher intimately familiar with that world, which I find so fascinating. At the same time it also allows me to address educational issues that concern me.

My aim is for my authorial anxieties around our country's education system to find their way, hopefully almost imperceptibly, through the voices of certain characters, into scenes of my work. I have considered several "school novels", both international and local, and my work certainly reflects on themes that appear in many well-known classics from this genre.[34] More particularly my work, like other South African elite school novels, contemplates the Anglo-African parentage of these institutions and some of the strange practices and traditions that seem to have been spawned from their mongrel breeding.[35]

John Van de Ruit's *Spud* trilogy is popular with a South African readership because it captures the idiosyncrasies and anachronisms of schools through its humour. I've discovered that humour in writing, as opposed to the spoken word, is exceptionally difficult to capture. Yet I realise that if my work is to be an accurate and complete reflection of the realities of any monastic boarding school, my writing cannot ignore the legendary boarding school

[34] I discovered a dissertation by Angela Schlein comparing JD Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and John Knowles' *A Separate Peace,* both novels that, along with *Lord of The Flies,* I consider to be timeless representations of the institutional logic and habits that exist in elite schools.

[35] Edyth Bulbring's *The Club* and Sarah Penny's *The Beneficiaries* both reflect on the traditions of elite South African schools as somewhat disturbing and curious, and I hope to add voice to their concerns.

anecdotes and eccentric teachers who beg to be satirised. Thus I feel compelled to include some humour; it feels necessary for a description of the boarding school environment and its occupants to ring true, but I struggle to sustain an amusing tone in my writing for long.[36] My concerns and intentions are also more earnest than Van de Ruit's, and so of course the overall tone of my writing differs.

Unlike other South African novels in the school genre, my manuscript gives brief consideration to the contrast between the educational experiences of scholars from poor, dysfunctional state schools, compared with elite, private, monochromatic boarding schools in South Africa. Thus the backdrop of South Africa's unique educational history is visible in my work: it comments obliquely on the damaging consequences of the educational reality facing working-class South Africans. In the foreground I focus more minutely on the divisions within the ranks of elite boarding schools.

I cannot resist some political advocacy in my work that considers my detailed personal understanding of several of South Africa's elite monastic schools. I know and admire the fact that they are regarded as centres of excellence by global standards. They stand in contrast to a failing national education system with rural schools generally reported as worst off. This leaves me with more questions than answers about the role that South Africa's private schools do and could play in addressing our country's education crisis. I am disturbed by the extent to which, in South Africa, the gates of learning of schools such as Hill House remain off limits to so many brilliant and deserving students. I hint at the questions in my work and, in doing so, also differentiate my manuscript from other South African school novels. However, I do not feel I arrive at any especially valuable conclusions on this front. Instead, I suspect the uncertainty that remains in my mind – on how to solve the problems of both our rich and our poor South African schools – are left as unanswered questions on the pages of my manuscript. Perhaps it is enough to hope that, if published, the novel engenders sufficient curiosity from those within the gates of our country's functioning schools to consider the lives of those who are outside them more carefully, and to recognise that when tested, there is little, if anything, to differentiate the behaviour and talents of those within and without.

[36] After all, so much of humour is about intonation and timing, which is more effectively captured in conversation and speech. This is why almost all the limited humour that exists in my manuscript is in the dialogue of the scholars.

The theme of loss of innocence is an obvious hallmark of Coming of Age novels – which a school novel must, by implication, be a part of – and I certainly always anticipated this being central to my story. However, as Lodge (1992: 46) explores further, 'It has been said that all novels are essentially about the passage from innocence to experience, about discovering the reality that underlies appearances' I hope that the context of my work reflects this notion differently from other school novels. In elite South African schools the legacy of inequality between races still looms large; these schools remain predominantly populated by children of elite, white businessmen or certainly, to the extent that these schools are becoming racially diverse, they remain culturally and economically monochromatic and extraordinarily Anglo-Saxon in their daily practices. Justice is my character who is a cross-border traveller – someone who manages to navigate both worlds, with varying degrees of success. My aim is for Justice to be the one character who manages to slip through the gates between the two worlds almost undetected.[37] My hope is that the irony is not lost on my readers that a security guard, who is charged with keeping people like himself outside, is the character who most successfully transitions both worlds.[38]

I also hope that observant readers may be conscious of the fact that in the regions of South Africa's private, full-time boys' boarding schools (there are only three left), the Gini coefficient is particularly dire. In our country, which has the dubious honour of having the biggest gap between rich and poor, I feel compelled to note that the location of these elite institutions is where this gap is at its worst.[39] Thus my manuscript's setting is a deliberate symbolic choice with significance that I hope is not lost on my readers.

THE GATES BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION

I encountered a number of media reports of real-life sex scandals that resembled my fictional story in uncanny ways. I cannot decide whether these factual synchronicities have helped or

[37] I, like the two characters who lift Justice in my manuscript, have had car conversations with Justice-equivalents who are family members of service staff at the school. Sometimes their connections to the school through historical association afford the next generation the chance to work at the school. Yet, in every instance I have encountered, they are forced to live and learn outside of those gates in their own impoverished communities, because their families are provided with no alternative.

[38] Is it necessary for me to add that a security guard is nothing more than a gatekeeper by another name?

[39] My research describes the wealth gap as being at its worst in these three provinces: the Eastern Cape (where St Andrew's College is located), KwaZulu-Natal (where Hilton College and Michaelhouse are located) and Mpumalanga. Source: http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-10-06/Report-03-10-062015.pdf.

hindered my writing. Of course the factual accounts affirm that my project has everyday social relevance, yet I feel that the lines between fact and fiction are blurred at times. I have read media reports of the rape trial of Harvard-bound Owen Labrie, from St Paul's School in New Hampshire that were disturbingly similar to my already existent plot and characters.[40] A scandal breaks in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands when a group of Hilton College boys post a photograph of themselves in role-play on Instagram. The photograph is suggestive of rape and their choice of caption is vulgar. At Rhodes University there are protests against the way the university handles rape allegations that seem to foreshadow the #MeToo movement. The female students march naked in protest and the media attention is heightened by this spectacle. I ventured to seek advice in the MA seminar about my legal right to adopt some of the details of these factual accounts into my fictional work because I believed elements of the real stories would enhance my manuscript. I was assured that this is my right and I was encouraged to do so. I started to see the improvements in my work, but the morality of doing this still bothered me.

The setting of my novel also presented me with a dilemma about the threshold between fact and fiction. I am conscious that I too am a person who, to some extent, has my nose 'pressed to the gates' of the school where my manuscript is set. Like my character Grace, this school is a place that has, since I can remember, held all my best memories and kept every male member of my family happy and safe. I am constantly conscious of suggestions of disloyalty to a school where I have so much history.[41] I feel anxious that my writing may be perceived as a criticism of this particular school, which I do not want. Yet I am aware of my own internal conflicts about the school and institutions of this ilk: in such places I, like all women,

[40] The *New York Times* ran several reports on the trial, but there have also been many other reports in other media. There were small details of the account that were uncannily similar: he is a jockish sports hero in the school, they meet for a tryst in a secret, off-limits room on campus, she does not report the rape for a few days and so compromises her evidence … the similarities go on and on.

[41] My strong historical connections to the school have weighed heavily on my conscience, despite attempts to convince myself that this should not affect me because the plot and characters are not real. I played on the school grounds on the weekends of my two elder brothers' time there; my father regaled our family with exaggerated tales of his time there throughout my childhood. In that school chapel I married a man who was schooled there, as were his father, uncle and brother. So, inevitably I suppose, our own two sons attended this school too – in fact one son is still there and now in matric, like certain of my fictional characters. In essence, I am almost certain that there cannot be a single female in the history of the school who can name more immediate male relatives who attended the school. This reality, alongside the fact that my parents either couldn't afford private schooling or didn't think it was necessary for girls, meant that Hilton College had mythical status in my childhood mind. I am aware that I still cannot quite shake off this childish sentiment. This has sat uncomfortably at the back of my mind as I've written.

will always be defined and treated as an outsider. Despite my love and personal knowledge of the place, this complicates my relationship with the setting. I like to think this has helped me to write this work – my love for it, my fascination for it, my frustration that it will never be a place where I can be an insider certainly ensures that I can only describe the place with passionate sentiments. I hope, however, that my sentimentality towards the place remains in check and that my literal experience informs my writing experience – I have reminded myself constantly that I must live on the outside of this place where the characters engage with each other beyond my reach, and they alone must move around this beautiful school.

I have also located the story on the school campus of Hilton College because I know its geography intimately, and because it has certain unique topographical and scenic features that serve the purpose of my story well. But a decision I made about the setting of my work concerned certain participants in my MA group, which became the focus of some animated discussion in a seminar: I decided not to name my fictional school by its real name, although anyone who has been there will know exactly which school I am describing.[42] Certainly, I have done this in part because of my sense of disloyalty that I describe above. But, more importantly, to the extent that my manuscript comments on the type of moral education this school provides and the types of boys it turns to men, I know it stands alongside a range of other traditional South African boys' schools. I am satisfied that it is not doing a worse or better job than other similar institutions, so I do not wish to single it out. To the extent that I am critical of the mores within those schools, I wish to implicate them equally. For this reason, I decided to label the boarding houses, fields and other landmarks within Hill House by traditional names given to such landmarks in a range of elite and traditional boys' private schools in South Africa. I am hoping an astute reader will understand my reasons for doing this, as is suggested in my foreword to my manuscript.

[42] Like Jonny Steinberg's *Midlands*, it was suggested to me that readers will recognise the real places. I know this. It was suggested to me that by attempts to conflate a range of labels from different schools in the naming of my fictional landmarks I would not be achieving much. But Steinberg's work was intended as a factual account, and I believe this to be the reason for annoyance by some of his critics. I have noted that most novels fictionalise the name of the schools in which they are set, although they are obviously based on real schools. I recognise St John's in Edyth Bulbring's *The Club*; St Andrew's College and DSG in Sarah Penny's *The Beneficiaries* and Ron Irwin, a friend, assures me that the school in his *Flat Water Tuesday* was his own school in America. It seems that, like me, the authors of all these works do not wish to defame the schools through their fictional accounts.

GENRE GATES

I have from time to time been side-tracked by my perception that it is necessary to classify my work into a genre. I am self-conscious that my literary snobbery is probably what prevents me from acknowledging that the work would be classified as Young Adult Fiction (YA). Yet I am simultaneously mindful that I am indeed writing for a teenage reader and some of my authorial choices have been influenced by this knowledge. Remembering the advice of Kurt Vonnegut to write with a specific reader in mind, I know that I have two particular readers in my sights, namely a middle-aged woman and a teenage girl, and this has helped me.[43] I was relieved by the responses I received at an MA seminar when I raised my genre concerns and especially my resistance to certain recommended conventions of YA. There seemed to be consensus that YA is more of a contemporary artificial construct than a genre, and it was also suggested to me that my work should not be constrained by any of my perceived conventions. I have previously held certain ideas about my characters, plot and points of view that seem to fly in the face of my limited research on the hallmarks of YA, and so I've opted to accept the views expressed in the MA seminar.[44] In order to allow the story to proceed as it must, I had to tell myself repeatedly that YA is simply a commercial classification that ensures books move on and off shelves in a bookstore efficiently, and that I must not allow this to influence my decisions.

In struggling with my genre dilemma I also discovered an academic paper by Melanie Koss (2009) that interested me. She states,

> 'A content analysis of current YA novels identified a trend away from the typical first person point of view. These books challenge the traditional linear, chronological, and single-voiced nature of narrative fiction, which (a) is typically told from the first-person point of view of the main character, or (b) focuses on a main character but is written in third person. Issues of form, voice, and structure are breaking new ground, and publishing trends are emerging.'

[43] Vonnegut's words are: 'Write to please just one person. If you open a window to make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia'. Source: https://www.writingclasses.com/toolbox/tips-masters/kurt-vonnegut-8-basics-of-creative-writing.

[44] I rationalise further that many classic novels that I read as a scholar, and which remain favourites of mine, are probably still read by more teenagers than adults today and so, technically speaking, if they weren't considered to be classics, these would probably now fall under the YA classification. I take comfort in this knowledge and realise that fitting my work into a specific genre is not imperative.

The research behind this trend makes perfect sense to me. I know that contemporary teenagers are used to gathering information from many different sources and they do not trust single sources any longer. They are also not particularly interested in one perspective; it is not how teenagers gather information from the world. This has reaffirmed my decision to write in polyphonic voices and helped me to become entirely resolved that it doesn't matter if my work is classified as YA or not. I have not allowed the so-called conventions and restrictions of this genre to curtail my own intentions and plans for the work, but I know instead that writing with my specific readers in mind has helped me.

Molly Brown expressed concern that too many protagonists in contemporary South African YA leave at the end of our stories.[45] This disrupted me, because I understand her sentiment – it is not a hopeful message to depict to young readers; it also suggests abandonment and giving up by the protagonist. I take it extremely personally when South Africans leave, and I felt unpatriotic putting Holly on that plane. I want no part in encouraging the exodus of young people from our country.[46] Yet I know that Holly is not me, and I cannot determine her fate. I trust in my writing methods and so placed myself outside my writing room again: Holly had to finish her time there and do what she needed to do, but to stay would have kept her incomplete and damaged. She needed to see new places and meet new people and see things from further away in order to understand that the world in which she was harmed, or the person who harmed her, was the product of a dysfunctional microcosm.[47] I know, from close personal experience, that these words are true – 'Africa is not easily forsaken by her children'[48] and I believe Holly loves her home too much to find equivalent happiness elsewhere. I certainly hope that Holly will return.

[45] On 21 May 2017, I attended a lecture by Prof Brown, hosted by Hilton College for their annual Teacher's Conference. I spoke to her afterwards and asked her a few questions, including her observations on contemporary South African YA fiction.

[46] I hope my sentiments in this regard are invisibly carried in the thoughts of Dodge's father, as contemplated by Dodge, '… they all became rugby heroes and muscled their way into first teams, then American universities, so they could leave this shithole of a country behind them to make a fresh start'.

[47] In an MA seminar it was also suggested to me that the story could end as Holly drives out the gates. I explained then that I wanted the epilogue to provide a zoomed-out, Dystopian perspective for Holly to counter Grace's Utopian prologue. The MA class remained divided on the point, but I am convinced that Holly needed this and so I have ended with her overlooking Hill House from afar, for the first time in her memory.

[48] I am unable to find the source of this quote that I seem to recall reading in a novel many years ago.

THE DUALITY OF GATEKEEPING AND NAVIGATING GATES

Did I find my way through these gates I have encountered? I am still unsure. Perhaps I found side-gates, or crept through some unnoticed in the dead of night. Perhaps I walked past a gate or two and am wrong in assuming I made it through some at all. I know I took a few wrong turns. Of course there were gates that I chose not to enter – they seemed too tightly shut. But I have arrived at my destination – a completed manuscript. I have come to think of my readers as types of gatekeepers themselves, and I now determine that only they will be able to judge how successfully I navigated the different gates.

What a surprise too to discover, upon arriving at my destination, that whilst I have been given access, I am nothing more than the keeper of the keys to my own work of fiction. There are things about all of my characters that I do not know. But I do know that my characters, like me as a writer, will experience the duality of having gates ahead of them, yet becoming their own gatekeepers.

I have also discovered that not all gatekeepers are territorial and officious. Many are simply doing their job – obeying the rules and fulfilling their duties. After all, gatekeepers are outsiders too, who wish they had better access to the world inside. I realise that gatekeepers do not need to be mean for ordinary people to feel like imposters, just because they got through the gate. I have concluded that I will be a genial gatekeeper – I will not refuse entry to anyone who chooses to come to the gate, to read my work. I will try to answer their questions about what I know about the place and its people, from the outside. But I will remind them that I am not a resident.

I hope Hill House and all its characters survive in the minds of visitors long after my gate-keeping work is done. I hope they revisit the place and the people there again, somewhere in the future. Perhaps, in their travels to new destinations, they may reflect backwards on a scene, or a thing said, or a tilt of the head of a character that they met and say, ‘I remember that’, or, ‘That gave me a new view’, or simply, ‘That was quite good’.

I do not want those who enter these gates to stay. In fact, I will insist that they leave. I hope their visit inspires them to march through other gates and become happy travellers to other places. They must enter and leave as many worlds of fiction – and non-fiction – as they can. I am not sure they will all try hard enough to meet and converse with enough of the characters

to form proper opinions on the things that matter to them. They, like me, may walk past some closed entrances and risk missing a beautiful view or a certain aspect. But that's okay too. In the end I have discovered that McEwan (2016: 371) is right. It is fair to say that 'the attempt was all.'

From: Mark Behr <markbehr1963@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: YOUR COMMENTS ON MY WRITING
Date: 29 October 2015 at 4:08:00 PM SAST
To: Nichola Roy <nicholaroy@iburst.co.za>

Dear Nichola,

My apologies for the late response:

This is a very old, painful, challenging, contradictory, fruitful and an enormous debate. Put your mind at ease that you will not be the one to solve it! You are a writer. Your job is to imagine, to write and to write well. That's all.

My impression from the brief section of your manuscript that I read is that the black person's voice is important and necessary. Your job is to write it as well and with as much empathy and sophistication as you can. This means making this person (character) three dimensional. He is not simply black and not simply a victim: we are all infinitely more than our so-called race or the sum of our suffering: class, race, gender, familial affiliations; sibling rivalries and loves, sexuality, sexual orientation, ability, personal history, taste, anger, love, joy, indifference, frustration, hope, yearning, ambition, hate, forgiveness, compassion, envy, our responses to the scent of frangipani: they're all key variables in an infinite (that word) interplay of stuff in each of us, no matter where we are in the hierarchies of life, politics or society.

Keep on writing. You're doing fine. You can worry about sophisticating and nuancing and getting rid of the dead wood later.
All of the best and remember: Bird by Bird.

Mark

On Oct 3, 2015, at 3:52 PM, Nichola Roy <nicholaroy@iburst.co.za> wrote:

Dear Mark

I so enjoyed your participation in yesterday's writing workshop and I have downloaded Bird by Bird on my Kindle which looks extremely promising as a resource - thanks. Also thank you for your careful consideration of my work. Your comments are invaluable, absolutely correct and appreciated. I look forward to your future participation in our workshops and wish we could have you with us until the end of the MA (and well beyond that).

I suspect you are also able to guide me on something else: I have spent a bit of time considering the academic question of "who has the right to tell whose story?" This is in part because I feel like an imposter for writing in the voice of an adolescent black rural male. I have also come under fire for this from a member of faculty who suggested I may have "affirmative action anxiety." I have not read any academic writing around the question but I imagine this is something that has undergone detailed consideration in the field of post-colonial literature. Regrettably, I am not trained beyond undergraduate level as an English Literature student, so my technical or academic knowledge in this sort of realm is limited. I am jumping ahead, but I do feel this may be a topic worth considering for my reflective essay, a requirement of the MA at the back end of the course, as you may know. But more importantly, for my immediate purposes I want to intellectually and ethically reassure myself that I am not being patronising, at worst, or over-ambitious, at best, by attempting to write in the voice of a character whose world I cannot possibly understand. I would welcome being guided to any sources that you feel could assist me.

I hope you do not mind me harassing you with this request.

Regards

Nichola Roy

REFERENCES AND WORKS CITED

Behr, M. Comments on my writing. Email, 29 October 2015.

Bridgood, J. 'In Girl's Account, Rite at St Paul's Boarding School Turned into Rape.' *New York Times*, 19 August 2015.

Brown, M. 'Darwin, Dennet, Einstein and Me.' English Teachers' Conference, 12 May 2017. In conversation after guest lecture.

Bulawayo, N. 2014. *We Need New Names*. New York: Back Bay Books.

Bulbring, E. *The Club*. 2008. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers.

Coetzee, JM. 2000. *Disgrace.* Johannesburg: Random House.

Coles, C. 'Forward, Wayward: The Writer in the World's Text, at Large.' In Kroll, J & Harper, G (eds). 2013. *Research Methods in Creative Writing*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gini Coefficient information accessed at: http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-10-06/Report-03-10-062015.pdf.

Glass, E. 2018. *Peach*. London: Bloomsbury.

Gqola, P. 2015. *Rape, a South African Nightmare*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.

Higginson, C. 2015. *Dream House.* Johannesburg: Pan Macmillan.

Hodgson, J. Plaque at McKenzie Gates, Hilton College, laid 20 October 1999.

Hosseini, K. 2004. *The Kite Runner.* London: Bloomsbury.

Irwin, R. 2013. *Flat Water Tuesday*. New York: St Martin's Press.

Kingsolver, B. Book Talk with *Book Revue*. Barbara Kingsolver interviewed by Pippa Smith. Glenshiel, Johannesburg, 10 February 2015.

Kingsolver, B. 2000. *The Poisonwood Bible.* London: Faber and Faber Ltd.

Koss, MD. 'Young Adult Novels with Multiple Narrative Perspectives: The Changing Nature of YA Literature.' *The Alan Review*. Summer 2009. Accessed at: *https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v36n3/koss.html.*

Kunzru, H, Shamsie, K et al. 'Whose life is it anyway? Novelists have their say on cultural appropriation.' *The Guardian*. 1 October 2016. Accessed at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/01/novelists-cultural-appropriation-literature-lionel-shriver.

Lodge, D. 1992. *The Art of Fiction*. London: Penguin Books.

Malik, K. 'Kenan Malik on Cultural Appropriation.' *ArtReviewAsia*. December 2017. Accessed at: https://artreview.com/features/ar_december_2017_feature_cultural_appropriation_kenan_malik/

McEwan, I. 2016. *Atonement.* London: Penguin Random House.

Moran, C. 2012. *How to Build a Woman.* London: Penguin Random House.

Penny, S. 2002. *The Beneficiaries*. Johannesburg: Penguin Books (SA).

Pamuk, O. 2015. *A Strangeness in My Mind*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd.

Prout, C. 'St. Paul's School Assault Survivor Chessy Prout On Rape Case, Verdict And Future.' *Today*. Accessed at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvrOqi2hLmU.

Salinger, J.D. 1994 (1951). *The Catcher in the Rye.* London: Penguin Books.

Schlein, A. 2017. *Privilege and idealism in Salinger and Knowles' Modern American Prep School Stories.* Dissertation: University of Florida, US.

Shriver, L. 'Lionel Shriver on dangerous 'fad' of cultural appropriation: full text.' *The Telegraph*. 13 September 2016. Accessed at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/09/13/lionel-shriver-on-dangerous-fad-of-cultural-appropriation-full-t/.

Steinberg, J. 2002. *Midlands*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers.

Van de Ruit, J. 2005, 2007, 2009. *Spud* trilogy. Johannesburg: Penguin Random House.

Vonnegut, K. 1999. '8 Basics of Creative Writing.' Excerpted in *Gotham Writers*. Accessed at: https://www.writingclasses.com/toolbox/tips-masters/kurt-vonnegut-8-basics-of-creative-writing.

Wagner-Martin, L. 2015. *Tony Morrison: A Literary Life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Warner, J. 'The Bilbioracle on the Elite's Unending Allure.' *Chicago Tribune*. 6 September 2016. Accessed at: http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-09-06/features/ct-prj-0908-biblioracle-20130906_1_boarding-school-the-biblioracle-printers-row-journal.

Wood, J. 2008. *How Fiction Works*. London: Picador.

Woolf, V. 'Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid.' In In David Bradshaw (ed). 2006. *Selected Essays*. London: Oxford University Press.

Woolf, V. 2014 (1929). *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*. London: Collins Classics.

Xaso, L & Pikoli, Z. 'Trengove has no right making a movie about us.' *IOL News*. 19 March 2017. Accessed at: https://www.iol.co.za/news/opinion/trengove-had-no-right-making-a-movie-about-us-8256194.