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HOSPITAL HILL

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CHAPTER ONE

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Poppy stood in a narrow strip of shade, but it was no cooler under the spindly tree with the heat rising from the hard sandy shoulder of the road. Her father was bent over the engine of the car, with the bonnet up. He stepped back, wiped his glasses with a handkerchief that he then shoved back in his pocket, before he lent forward again to inspect the engine. Her mother paced up and down smoking. Bella lay on the back seat of the car with both doors open, fanning herself.

Harold closed the bonnet. “Let’s get going.”

There were words between her parents before they got into the car, but Poppy couldn’t catch them, just the edge in Felicity’s voice and the sigh in Harold’s response.

They had already been on the road for a few hours, the car was filled with the remains of the rooms that had not been packed in the van. Poppy’s knees had turned red from the sun, and there were fine scratches on the side of her thigh from the wicker basket on the seat between her and Bella that her sister, trying to gain more space for herself, kept pushing closer to her. It was packed with the photo album, their mother’s jewellery box and four small framed paintings carefully wrapped in fabric.

Harold tried to get a sing-along going, but no one was going to be jollied out of their discomfort, and he sang alone until he too fell silent. The rattle of the vehicle and the dust and fumes made Poppy feel sick. Selma had said look into the distance, keep your eyes on the horizon. She watched a line of trees rise to a koppie and then the hill dropped down to a plain, the end of which was a hazy blur in the heat. She fell asleep, waking once to see her mother’s head nodding as she too drifted off, Bella staring out of her window into the distance and her father talking to himself quietly as sweat ran down the side of his face.

When Poppy woke again they were pulling up a driveway. Ahead of them were two garages and two houses, one on either on side of the driveway. They sat in the car with the engine still running. No one needed to ask which house was theirs. Her father had told her

their new home was on a hill, but this was not like the koppie near the farm, where, when you reached the red rock, you could see beyond the house to the clump of trees at the bend of the river.

The house to their right had a clipped lawn and flowers blooming in the curved beds that bordered it. The house on the left looked bare with no curtains at the windows. It was smaller than their house on the farm. Through the dirty car window Poppy could see a large tree at the other end of the garden, rising out of the overgrown grass and beyond that a high red-brick wall that glowed in the late afternoon sun.

They were startled by a woman tapping on Harold's window. "Hello, hello. You must be the Dickensons. I'm your new neighbour."

They got out of the car. Harold stood talking to the woman. Felicity joined them, but Poppy knew from the firm set of her mother's mouth that she did not approve of their new neighbour's bright chatter and persistent questions. Felicity walked off while the woman was still in mid stream of the story she was telling them, leaving Harold to nod politely.

"Come, Dad," Bella called from the small front veranda, "bring the keys."

The house felt hollow as they walked through the empty rooms, their footsteps loud on the floorboards, the smell of it musty. Poppy's bedroom was the smallest. The window looked out onto the backyard. Bella's bedroom window looked onto a bare patch of soil that was probably once a vegetable patch, but now had weeds growing in it. Beyond it a Mexican blood trumpet cascaded over the fence.

The removal van pulled into the driveway, hooting as it did so. Poppy followed the men as they offloaded boxes and carried furniture into the house. Her bed with its white headboard decorated with two yellow daisies in each corner and a wardrobe — also white with beading set into each door — looked uncomfortable in their new setting. Next to Poppy's bedroom was the bathroom and on the other side of it at the end of the passage was Bella's room, which was larger and seemed lighter than her room. Bella was unpacking, and when she noticed Poppy standing in her doorway, she stepped in between the boxes on the floor and closed the door, leaving Poppy standing on the other side in a sudden dimness.

Poppy counted seven doors that led off the passage. One right next to Bella's bedroom door, she discovered was a deep walk-in cupboard with shelves all the way up one wall and a high window, that when she stood on tip toe and looked out could see the large tree and beyond it a small gate half-hidden by overgrown shrubs. To climb out the window she had used the shelves, but once perched on the windowsill she could see her mother in the garden and climbed back down into the dusty room.

She walked back down the passage, past her parents' bedroom and the lounge, both of which had large windows that faced the front garden, and with the light cast from the open doors of the rooms leading off it, she could see the wear on the wallpaper, and rectangles where it still looked new, where a picture would have hung. The passage turned sharply and at the end of that small section was the kitchen.

A woman was standing at the sink washing teacups that must have come out of a box opened on the table.

"Hello, I'm Poppy."

But the woman couldn't have heard her, because she didn't turn around at Poppy's greeting.

Her father walked into the kitchen, carrying a box. "Found it. The kettle. Oh, Keturia you've met Poppy."

The woman turned around and nodded.

Poppy was in the way, her father told her, and he sent her into the garden. She stood under the huge tree looking up into its wide, spreading branches. Thick roots rose from the ground around the base of the trunk, like the arms of an octopus. Balancing on one raised root, she used it to run up the slightly sloping trunk into the wide low fork of the tree. She climbed higher on the sturdy branches.

Looking down, Poppy could see her mother standing on the lawn between the dining room table, a bed, the sofa and a scattering of other furniture that had yet to be taken into the house.

She couldn't see her mother's face, but heard her response when her father asked where she wanted the movers to place the leaded bookcase. "Wherever you want, Harold. Do what you like, like you always do."

It was a hill. Poppy could see that now. Their house faced onto a three-storey building with pine trees clustered around it and beyond the building to the right, she could see, on the opposite ridge, large homes rising up through the trees. She turned to look up the hill, and it was then that she saw tall building after tall building stacked next to each other, their tops glowing with golden sunlight, and in the sky behind and above them dark billowing clouds. She turned to call to her mother, but Felicity was no longer in the garden and neither was the furniture. At a crash of thunder and sudden rushing rain, she quickly climbed down the tree. Her father was already beneath it when she got down, and they ran hand in hand across the lawn to the house.

They ate cheesy toast and drank sweet tea at the kitchen table and finished off the biscuits Felicity had baked for the journey from the farm to Johannesburg, while they listened to the sounds of their new home.

CHAPTER TWO

Milk was delivered early every morning and left at the bottom of the driveway. Four glass bottles, two for their house and two for the neighbours'. Keturia fetched it before she came in to make breakfast. In the first few days in their new home, Poppy woke early and ran down the driveway in her pajamas in the half-light of the morning to fetch the milk. She liked to open it, pressing down on the centre of the foil lid with her thumb with just enough pressure to make it pop open. But she had stopped after Keturia told her it was a waste of her time to walk down the driveway and then worry on her way back to the house that there was no milk for breakfast, only to find the milk already in the kitchen.

Almost every late afternoon a thunderstorm drenched the garden; some days the rain was so strong, it rushed down the long lane that ran from Kotze Street down to Sam Hancock Street. The first time the rainfall took a detour into their backyard, Poppy waded barefoot in the two-inch high water before it seeped through the cracks in the slasto paving.

Poppy thought the big tree in the garden was a grape tree, with its many bunches of tightly clustered green berries. Her mother had laughed; it was a Belhambra, she said, grows like a weed. Sitting high up in its canopy, Poppy could see into some of the windows of the building their house faced onto. It was a nurses' home. Poppy could see a sliver of the rugby field to the right of the nurses' home, which she cut across or walked around on the short walk to school. Without a watch she timed the two routes by counting, but she usually lost count halfway, so she could not say which route — around the field or across it — was faster. But she always arrived at school just in time to put her bag on its designated hook before the school bell rang.

There was a hospital in front of the nurses' home, for babies being born, another hospital across busy Joubert Street Extension, and her father said there more hospitals up and over the hill as you headed to town.

From the tree she watched those who walked up or down the long lane that ran behind their house, often nurses and others in uniform. On the other side of the lane was a high wall than ran to the top of the hill.

“Why’s that wall so high?” Poppy called down to her mother, who was working in the garden.

Felicity, standing halfway in the shrubbery deadheading a daisy bush, did not answer.

“Mom? Mom?”

“What, Poppy? I’m busy.”

“The wall, what’s it for?”

“What do you mean? What wall?”

“The tall one behind our house, on the other side of the lane, why’s it so high?”

“It’s a bloody prison,” Felicity said.

“A prison?”

Felicity turned her back to Poppy and carried on trimming, with hard, fast snips of her secateurs.

“You never said we’d be living next to a prison.”

Felicity turned sharply, flung the secateurs on the lawn and marched under the tree. She looked up at Poppy. “No, I didn’t tell you because I didn’t know. Your father failed to mention there was a prison twenty steps from our back door, and all this around us.” She waved in the general direction of the nurses’ home. “And the noise from that road. Those bloody buses and trucks all day going up that hill. He also didn’t tell me there was a mortuary up the hill.”

Poppy didn’t ask what a mortuary was. She watched her mother march into the house and only when she was sure her mother wasn’t going to come back out and resume her tirade did she relax her grip on the branch she had been clutching. Still, she counted anyway to 119, by then her mother should be feeling better.

Poppy looked back at the red-brick wall behind a tall wire fence on the other side of the lane behind the house. One section of the wall had small oblong windows set far apart, two lines of them, the highest windows positioned just below the roof. She noticed now the iron bars across them. Closer to the top of the hill she could see the roof of a large, long, brown building, and just below the eaves were even smaller windows, hundreds of them.

She quietly slipped out of the tree, landing as softly as she could on the ground below, and waited for a moment in case her mother had heard her. Then she picked up her shoes and left the garden through one of two low gates that led into the lane. It was cool at this time of the day, with the high walls of the prison casting the lane into shadow, but she chose to walk down the hill to the rugby field, a route that took her quickly out of view of the house and the windows where prisoners, she imagined, could see her.

CHAPTER THREE

Felicity stood at the bay window of her bedroom. Behind her the bed was strewn with clothes that still needed to be hung in the wardrobe. Ahead of her the lawn, which she could see now sloped slightly to the deep flowerbed of big aloes, their flower heads long dead. Four pine trees had been planted next to the driveway and beneath them were leggy hydrangeas wilting in the heat. She had always hated pine trees, so it was inevitable this garden would have them, she thought.

There were more beyond the fence. She counted them. Twenty. At least they partially shielded the building the house looked onto. She could still see the dark stains running down the back wall from the clogged gutters. Filled with pine needles, no doubt. Nobody thought of that when they had planted them. Some overzealous gardener. When? Twenty years ago?

At least they had a house, she told herself, but it was far smaller than Felicity had imagined. Harold had told her it was near Parktown. She expected something grander, but why, she wondered, had she imagined herself sitting in a spacious sunny sitting room with big windows framing a wide expanse of lawn? Why, when Harold was a pauper. She heard her eldest sister Evelyn in her nasal tone telling her not to be so dramatic. “Hardly a pauper, Felicity. It’s a setback, that’s all. Harold will make a fortune in Johannesburg. You’ll end up living the high life.”

She had started to believe it as they packed up the farm. It was Evelyn who had told her about the grand homes with their big gardens in Parktown.

She knew now Evelyn hadn’t meant it. Her foolishness rested uneasily in her mind. She had imagined a garden so large it had several wide terraces. Why had she gone down that route in her mind, especially since no one believed Harold could amount to anything?

But here they were wedged between a prison, hospitals and a mortuary. She imagined Selma laughing at her comedown, always taking the opportunity as they were growing up to mock Felicity. Although, when it had come to Eli, Selma has been almost kind.

When Felicity finished sorting out her and Harold’s clothes, she went out on to the small front veranda and stood there looking into the darkness descending on the garden. As

she stepped onto the damp lawn, crickets chirping in a patch of weeds growing beneath the window stopped suddenly, and then started up again as she crossed the lawn to the middle, where she looked up at the sky. But the lights of their house, shining out from the curtainless windows, and the blocks of lights from the many windows of the nurses' home, obscured the stars.

She followed the edge of the lawn. Hidden by an untrimmed hedge of plumbago and honeysuckle winding into each other was a hibiscus blooming with tens of large, sturdy pink flowers. A small bird darted into the shrubbery, then darted out. There was a soft scent in the air that she couldn't identify, but remembered from somewhere.

There was a small gate in the wire mesh fence that ran around the property. It opened onto a lane. Felicity walked down it. She came to a rugby field with more sand than grass. She walked to the centre of the pitch, her shoes catching on small stones. The edges and corners of the field were in deep darkness. The night sky had a strange glow from the hundreds and hundreds of squares and rectangles of light shining from the buildings rising up behind the prison.

Felicity sat at the dining room table, the detritus of breakfast all around her, crumbs on the tablecloth, Harold's napkin dropped next his plate smeared with yolk. The teapot had dripped onto the tablecloth. She wondered if the stain could be removed. He had left his chair out, when he had risen from the table. He was annoyed. She had told him she would attend church the following Sunday, he could go ahead without her today. He needed a pressed shirt for work the next day. He couldn't argue with that. She was in the garden when he left, and as she watched him walk to the car she noticed his trousers were really too creased to be seen in public, but she said nothing.

Once he had left, Felicity set up a stool, a small table and her easel in the garden. A swarm of miggies danced in the air a foot or so above one particular patch of lawn, remaining suspended. Felicity wondered what compelled these tiny insects to hover in the air, remaining in one spot for what seemed ages. She had planned to trim the hedge back hard for the hibiscus to show off its colours. But sitting fingering the bristles on her brush she considered the tangled shrubbery, the dried seed heads and long grass finding its way into the flowerbed. She left it as it was and painted the garden, overgrown and tired now of summer.

Felicity barely glanced at Harold when he returned from church. He went straight inside. She waited, anticipating his slow steps across the lawn, once he had changed into his Sunday casuals. It was a phrase he used regularly. It set Felicity on edge. As expected he

came back outside, stopping behind her and to one side. She didn't need to turn around to know he was rocking slightly on his heels, with his hands in his trouser pockets.

She pre-empted his questions about what she had been doing in the hours he had been doing his bidding to the Lord. "How was church? Chat to anyone?"

"Oh, they are a solid bunch. Good people."

"I'm sure they are. I'll get a chance next to Sunday to make my acquaintance." She turned to look at Harold.

He was puzzling, his head to one side. Wondering, she thought, whether her tone was sarcastic. It was.

Harold chewed the inside of his cheek, his mouth a little puckered. "You said that last Sunday, and the one before that."

Felicity looked back, pleased at the progress she had made on her painting, and she considered that he was also probably not sure what to make of the rough brush strokes she had made in many different shades of green.

She smiled at Harold.

He smiled back.

It was an expression Felicity so seldom saw Harold use, that when he did, she felt an uncomfortable tenderness for him.

CHAPTER FOUR

As the bus pulled away with a series of jerks, Violet looked back at her grandmother. She had waited with Violet in the cool autumn air from long before the sun rose while the bus was loaded for the journey. Now she stood still in the grey light of early morning, the trees still dark shapes against the horizon, as others milled around her. Violet watched her until she could no longer distinguish her grandmother from those who were still waiting to board other buses for other destinations.

The journey from Tzaneen to Pietersburg to Pretoria and then Johannesburg was snatches of sleep, landscape that never changed and then suddenly did, icy wind through cracked windows or burning sun magnified through the grimy glass. Soon after leaving Tzaneen the bus strained up a steep road that curved through thick forest rising up and falling below. Violet clutched the seat in front of her as the bus teetered at times as if it might go over the edge. At the grinding of gears and the shuddering of the bus as it strained up the hill, she worried they would not reach the top. The relief at reaching the summit was short-lived as the bus picked up speed, hurtling along the narrow road around the base of low, wide hills.

In Pietersburg, anxious she may not find the bus for Pretoria, Violet kept close to two women, who had sat behind her in the bus from Tzaneen talking of the city they worked in and their children, who they were leaving behind at home and were ready to go on their way but seemed reluctant to do so.

From Pietersburg the bus cut through poorts with steep, clear cliffs rising up on either side, then sped on along stretches of straight road with grassland on either side from which startled birds occasionally flew, then lurched through traffic as they came into Pretoria.

At the terminus, Violet was relieved to see her mother standing to one side scanning the passengers as they stepped slowly off the bus onto solid ground. Her mother only had a day off work and she told Violet they needed to hurry to the station to catch the train to Johannesburg. Violet got a window seat and as the train rushed and slowed and rushed on

again she gazed out of the window at the golden grass, the sun catching its tips, flashing by. Clumps of bright green vegetation and bent trees gathered near hidden streams and there was a house not much more than a smudge in the distance with smoke rising from one of three chimneys that Violet could count before it disappeared from view. A horse galloped alone in a field. She smiled as it kicked its legs up behind it in a spurt of exuberance.

Violet and her mother spoke of the arrangements, the job Violet was going to and the accommodation her mother had secured through a friend of a friend.

Violet was surprised to hear her mother was now working in Johannesburg. “Why, what happened, Ma?”

Keturia shrugged and pressed her lips together.

It was a look Violet knew was a sign that her mother did not want to speak bitter words. She was surprised at her disappointment that she would now never see the house that had kept her mother away, since she was a small child, for most of each year. A house Keturia had described as too quiet, with its many silent rooms with high patterned ceilings, with a large lawn bordered by a circle of tall trees that no one ever sat under; the only person, her mother had said, that perhaps benefited from the deep shade was the man who clipped the lawn’s curved edge.

“He died,” Keturia said.

“Who?”

“Van Vuuren. The wife has gone to Cullinan. The girls are married now, the boy, he’s in Cape Town at university.”

“Is it better, Ma, the new job?”

Keturia did not answer at first, but a while later said: “The house is close to where you will be working at the shop.”

Keturia Mahlangu could offer little advice to Violet on life in Johannesburg, having only been working there for a few weeks herself. And there was too much and too little to say after spending so many years mostly apart. They sat in silence for the rest of the journey as the train rattled and swayed. Violet’s rested her head against the window, her right arm over the suitcase on her lap, holding it tight as her mother had warned her to do, her left hand in her mother’s warm, dry, solid grasp. She longed to stay there forever.

The rise of tall buildings as they came towards Johannesburg was a faint outline in the misty distance. Violet was unsure at first she had seen them. As they approached the city, the train wound through a web of warehouses, squat buildings, small houses right next to each other

with front doors that opened out almost onto the street, long chimney stacks with steam rising from them and then such large buildings that only snatches of blue sky could be seen as rectangles and squares above and between them.

They got out at Park Station into a crush of people. Violet's mother took the case, as they pushed through the crowd to find a bus to Meadowlands. Two young boys offered to help carry the case, trying hard to prise it from Keturia's hands while bearing down on it to make it too heavy to hold.

"Voetsek," she yelled.

Violet was startled at her mother and even more so at the effect her words had on the boys, who dashed off to help someone else.

They walked the last stretch of the journey in deep darkness. Her mother walked fast, taking long strides that Violet could not match, and her small suitcase was a weight she now felt was too heavy to bear. At a corner where two roads crossed each other, her mother stopped. Violet set down the suitcase at her feet; her body ached and an acrid smell in the air burnt her eyes. She looked up to the sky, but the millions of pinpricks of light she expected to see were not there.

"What's that smell?" Violet asked her mother, the sharp odour catching at the back of her throat. In the darkness around them, she could see rows of houses on either side of the sandy road, disappearing into the night. The windows were dark, except for one house nearby, where a feeble light flickered behind the window.

Violet looked at her mother, noticing the uncertainty in her eyes as she looked up and down one street, and then the other.

"It looks different at night," Keturia said.

Violet knew better than to ask if they were lost and remained silent, watching her mother's face.

A man stepped out of the darkness so suddenly that Violet saw her mother start. He was wearing a uniform.

"Mama, what are doing out so late?" he said, smiling at Keturia.

She watched her mother cast a cold look at the man, before she turned to Violet. "Come, it's this way."

Violet followed, sticking closer to her mother as the darkness closed in on them.

He called after them. "Be careful, Mama, there are tsotsis about. They like pretty young girls."

Violet looked back. She couldn't see him, she could only hear him chuckling to himself as if he could still see them and was watching them as they walked away.

Ma Dlamini greeted them brusquely when she opened her front door, hurrying them into the house and shutting the door quickly behind them. It was dark inside the front room, a soft light shone from another room. It was the kitchen, where they had tea and biscuits. Violet longed to get out of the thick coat her mother had given her at the bus terminus and insisted she wear on the journey from Pretoria, worried Violet may forget it on the train.

Violet was eager to put the gruelling journey behind her, and the mat on the kitchen floor was a welcome bed. Her mother took the bed Violet would use in a room she was to share with another lodger.

In the morning the two mothers and Violet sat in the living room. It was a long conversation, too long for Violet after the worry of the journey day before. Violet knew her new job at a flower shop in town was to clean and make tea, but she hadn't followed her mother's account to Ma Dlamini of how the job had come about. Instead, her eyes kept wandering to the sideboard, on which stood a photograph of a young woman, a smile around her eyes, her face open to the world, standing close to a young man.

The two women spoke in a lengthy roundabout of conversation about the cold weather that had come as a surprise, how March should still be warm, and how a mutual friend had never got over the loss of his wife, and of the children of that marriage, one in jail, one out of the country in Russia, or so Violet thought she had heard. But by the time she stopped daydreaming to listen, they had moved on to other topics.

Dusk fell soon after her mother left. Violet's heart sank with the sun. There was little light left in the room she was to share with Beatrice, and in the growing darkness she sat on her bed wishing she had not agreed to come. Beatrice lit a candle on the small table between their beds, and in the little light it gave off Violet began to unpack her clothes from the small brown case she had used until the week before for school books. Ma Dlamini came into the bedroom, and, standing next to the bed, she peered into the small suitcase at the items Violet lifted out. Two dresses, her favourite one a deep blue with small white flowers edging the sleeves and winding around the flare of the skirt, the other dress a solid dark green, two blouses, a skirt, a cardigan that was just too small for her, a pale pink nightdress, a black scarf

and a pair of stockings. Violet slipped the little black dog her grandmother had knitted for her under her mattress.

Violet was startled at the hard look Ma Dlamini gave her, and the sharpness with which she left the bedroom. Violet could hear her heels clicking loudly on the floor in the next room. Beatrice, who was reluctantly clearing space on the small table between the two beds, sniggered. Or so Violet thought, but when she looked up at her, Beatrice's face was a blank. A low shelf at the bottom of a small wardrobe, with hinges that creaked each time the left door was opened, had been cleared for Violet's clothes, but the hanging space was full and as there was no space for her skirt and two dresses, she folded those up as well as and put them on the shelf.

Ma Dlamini returned with sheets and one blanket. "You return these at month-end. Washed." She left the bedroom as sharply as she had entered, closing the door with an angry click.

Violet held the folded sheets and blanket unsure what Ma Dlamini meant.

"First wages you will be spending on your own blankets," Beatrice said, as she took the linen from Violet and began to make up her bed.

They heard the heels again and waited. Ma Dlamini opened the door. "Rent."

Violet looked at her, at Beatrice, and then, realising what was expected, opened the small dark blue handbag with a tight gold-coloured clasp that her granny had given her as a farewell gift. Her hands fumbled for the money her mother had given her for two months' rent in advance. Ma Dlamini left the room, this time not closing the door.

Beatrice shut the door softly. "Don't worry, you'll get used to her."

At those first warm words, Violet's throat tightened and, sitting on her bed, she looked down to hide her tears.

CHAPTER FIVE

Violet and Beatrice barely spoke as they washed and dressed. Violet didn't respond to Beatrice's complaints that there was not enough light from the candle for her to touch up her face. She had made it clear to Violet the night before that she didn't get up this early, and was doing Violet a favour by taking her into town to show her where to find the shop. The hard knot of anxiety in her stomach tightened as Beatrice's irritation rose while she struggled to find her shoes in the dimly lit bedroom. They had slipped far beneath the bed, and Violet had to kneel to feel under it before she found them.

The sun had risen by the time the bus was coming towards town, but the weak morning light cast a strange pall over the buildings, and at the steady rhythm of the bus, Violet lost her bearings for a moment, unsure if it was dusk or dawn. They had been lucky to get seats for most of the journey, and Beatrice, now chatty, laughed as she indicated a smear of lotion on Violet's face that she had not applied properly in the dim light of their bedroom. But even after Violet rubbed it in, her skin still itched in the dry Johannesburg air.

Once off the bus, the fresh air was a brief relief after the heat and crush of the bus, but it was far cooler than Violet had expected and her dress was no shield against the cold. With the sun still rising, the streets of Hillbrow were in shadow. But as they walked up Hospital Street, she looked up and saw a brilliant blue against the tops of the buildings.

Violet had to walk fast, almost run, to keep up with Beatrice's clipped pace as they wove through streets. She worried that she wouldn't remember the way to work when tomorrow she had to come on her own. The incline of Hospital Street ended at Kotze Street. At the corner Beatrice stopped to catch her breath. People pushed past them as she took a handkerchief out of her bag to dab her forehead and upper lip.

Beatrice looked at her watch. "We're early. The shop won't be open for at least half an hour." She led the way east along Kotze. "It's along here, I think. There."

They peered through the grimy window.

It was so dim inside Violet could just make out the buckets with flowers in them, but beyond that she couldn't see. "I can see what I will be doing today."

"It's a start. You can look for something better in a while." Beatrice looked at her watch. "I have to go. I'll be back at lunch, to see how you are getting on. I guess they'll open at eight."

"Thanks, Beatrice."

"You'll be fine."

Violet watched Beatrice walk on, wondering where she was going and what her day held. She had mentioned she worked for a newspaper, and had spoken with Ma Dlamini at supper the previous night about an article she was working on, but Violet had been so preoccupied with her aching body and desperate need for sleep that she had barely listened to their conversation.

Violet stood outside the closed shop watching people who came past, some rushing, others in no hurry. She looked up at the block after block of flats. On some of the balconies washing was strung on lines, one had a potted plant that was not doing well on the south side of the building. On another balcony a woman was leaning on a railing smoking, looking down at the street below. Along the road, in the direction they had come, was a high grassy hill with a wire fence around the top. Someone was standing on the summit.

Violet paced but stopped when she noticed a man who was opening up a shop across the road, looking at her. The way he watched her made her wonder if she should walk on.

Other shops were also opening and Violet wondered who would meet her. She had forgotten the shop owner's name. It was called By Arrangement but there was no indication of who owned it among the writing on the glass door. Gold cursive that had begun to flake said Flowers for Funerals, Festivities and Fun! It opened at half past eight, but without a watch Violet couldn't say how long she still had to wait.

"You must be Violet," a high-pitched voice from behind her startled her. Violet turned to see a woman with wild red curls crushed beneath a bright pink beret, a face punctuated with red lipstick and shiny blue eyeshadow, small beads of sweat glistening on her nose and upper lip beneath a heavy coating of powder.

"Yes." She had been worried that her too small cardigan and scuffed shoes were noticeable, but the woman had a smudge of something unidentifiable on her cheek, and her handbag looked as worn as Violet's shoes.

"Oh lovely, come in. I am Mrs Tilly, sorry I am late. I must give you keys to the shop. I'm never on time, especially now the cold is coming, but don't tell the Henkelmans that. Oh you look chilly, let's get the kettle on."

Violet couldn't make out everything Mrs Tilly said, so she mostly nodded as the rush of words spilled from her brightly painted lips. She waited while Mrs Tilly battled with a set of keys, finding it difficult to get purchase with her bony fingers, covered in raised veins and dark spots.

Once the door was opened, a dank smell hit Violet hard and with the light on she saw the floor was littered with the dried leaves of cut flowers, and the flowers were mostly faded. She was shown to a small kitchen behind a limp curtain. While she looked around for the teapot, Mrs Tilly set out one cup and a saucer and the tea tin, and brought a pint of milk from her bag. She set out a tin mug for Violet.

"Well, Violet, once we've had our tea, we need to clean. I think we should start with fresh water in the buckets and then the kitchen and the windows."

While Mrs Tilly topped up her teacup, Violet began to drag buckets — too full of water to lift — to a narrow backyard behind the shop where she poured the stinking liquid down the drain. Then she put back all the buckets, cleaned and filled with fresh water and with what few flowers could still be sold. She swept and mopped the floor, struggling to do so as a stream of Mrs Tilly's friends came in to chat and for whom Violet was told to make tea.

The trill of the phone startled Violet. Mrs Tilly, sitting right beside it, waited to answer, then eventually picked up the phone. "Hello, By Arrangement, how may I help you? No, we have no roses today, but I can phone the Norwood branch and have them delivered. Yes, baby's breath, yellow roses."

Mrs Tilly wrote the order down, and repeated it back to the caller. Then she set to calling the order through to somewhere else where there was a better supply of flowers.

Hunger was gnawing at Violet's stomach, but she was not sure of when she could take lunch. She started on the windows, first cleaning the layer of grime outside and then inside, before spraying a clear liquid — the smell burning her nose — onto the glass pane. Precariously positioned on an upturned bucket, she wiped the windows to a gleam. Outside, looking at her reflection in the window, she watched the man who was still standing on the top of the hill. There was another man further along the top of the hill that she had not seen earlier.

“Oh Violet, I can actually see outside now,” Mrs Tilly laughed as Violet came back into the shop. She sniffed when Violet failed to join in the fun. “You can start in the kitchen now.”

Violet set to the task, alarmed when a sharp scurry caught her eye. Sweat pricking under her arms, she gingerly emptied the small cupboard below a narrow counter. Stained and chipped plates, empty tins and biscuit packets. She needed the letter for the pass office but was unsure how to ask.

“Can I help you?” Violet heard Mrs Tilly say, a hard edge to her voice.

“I have come to see Violet for her lunch break.”

At the sound of Beatrice’s voice, Violet felt the tightness in her chest ease.

“All right. I’ll call her, wait outside.”

When Violet emerged from behind the curtain Beatrice was still standing in the shop surveying the dismal display of flowers, and when she looked at Violet, a smile played at the corners of her mouth. The doorbell tinkled, and before Violet and Beatrice turned to see who had entered, they saw Mrs Tilly’s face light up. It was a young man, dark hair, a quick walk, a small circular cap flush with the crown of his head. Violet thought she saw a ripple of recognition pass between the man and Beatrice, but then it was gone and she wondered if she had imagined it.

“Oh, you must be Violet. Violet, what a perfect name for someone who works at a flower shop. Violet and Petunia,” the young man said.

Violet looked at him blankly.

“Petunia is Mrs Tilly’s name. Petunia Tilly. Isn’t that fabulous?” he said.

Mrs Tilly smiled. “Oh stop it, Davey, stop teasing me.” But she didn’t seem to mind the young man who found her so amusing.

“Pet, the shop is looking so lovely,” Davey said.

Mrs Tilly smiled at Davey. “We’ve been working hard.”

“Your letter,” he handed Violet an envelope. She opened it and saw two banknotes against a folded piece of thin white paper. She looked up at him, he winked.

“Get that sorted tomorrow. We can’t have you ending up in there,” he said, nodding up the road to the hill.

“Oh, it’s such a nuisance. What time will you be in tomorrow?” Mrs Tilly asked.

“It could take all day,” Beatrice said.

“Well, it’ll have to come off your wages,” Mrs Tilly said.

Beatrice bristled.

"Oh Pet, I think we can allow Violet the day. Come on now, I'll pop in tomorrow to see how you are getting on," Davey said.

"We are going for lunch. Violet will be back at a quarter to two," Beatrice said.

Violet went to the back to fetch her handbag, but chose to tuck the folded envelope under the elastic band of her underwear. Davey was leaning on the counter, chatting to Mrs Tilly as they walked out. Beatrice closed the door hard.

They walked further along Kotze, Violet looking at the coats, dresses and shoes on display in the shops they passed, and then they headed down a busy road before turning left near the bottom of the hill. They came to a field, and walking around it they found a shady spot to sit. Beatrice opened a package with two pieces of vetkoek filled with mince. They ate in silence, watching other people who had settled nearby for their midday meal.

Relieved at seeing Beatrice, Violet chatted about her morning. The work, the visitors, the bright long ring of the phone, that there were almost no flowers to sell. "I cleaned that shop, you should've seen it before I started. She sat talking the whole morning. Then when that man comes in it's all 'Mrs Tilly, the shop looks so lovely.'"

Beatrice had been quiet, so much so that Violet's chatter subsided, but when she offered Violet half of her vetkoek, she said: "I love these colours."

Violet followed her gaze to the soft yellow and red leaves above them set against the blue sky. It was hot now, and Violet stretched her legs to catch a wedge of sun coming through the tree they were sitting under. Beyond the field stood a high stone wall with a wire fence above it and a strange elevated metal hut that somehow floated above and beyond the wall.

"What's that place?" Violet asked.

"Number Four," Beatrice said.

Violet looked at her quizzically.

"A prison, Violet," Beatrice said.

"Are you all right, Beatrice?"

"Yes, why?"

"You seem worried."

"No, just busy."

Beatrice closed her eyes and rested against the tree. Violet did the same. There was the hum of an occasional car that ran along this small street, a school bell ringing, the calling of children, the pines dotted around the field offering a sharp scent.

They drifted off. Suddenly Beatrice started. “You better get back.”

They jumped up and dusted themselves off.

“You are going to be late,” Beatrice said. “Let’s go this way, it will be quicker.”

They walked up the hill along a lane. Past the hospital on their right was a house. On their left a high wire fence and beyond that an even higher brick wall. Beatrice walked fast. Up ahead, just below the summit of the hill, Violet saw the dark roof of a long brown building with small windows set into the brick. The lane opened at the top of the hill onto Kotze Street, and only once they had crossed to the other side where people streamed around them and sound of cars and buses thrummed in Violet’s ears did they stop.

“Let’s not go that way again,” Beatrice said.

They were standing almost directly opposite the grassy hill Violet had seen from the shop. A wooden door, so large Violet had not seen anything like it before, was set into the side. A police van drove up to the big studded wooden doors, idling. She caught the sound of shouting, but with the grind of cars and buses clogging the street, she wasn’t sure where it came from.

“The shop is that way,” Beatrice pointed down the street. “I’ll fetch you at four o’ clock. It’s a nightmare getting home,” Beatrice said.

Violet watched her walk on and just before she turned she saw her stop to talk to someone. It looked like Davey. But she wasn’t sure and she had to get back to the shop. As she approached the florist, a hardness set firm in her stomach, she was worried that Mrs Tilly would still be annoyed about the day off tomorrow. But she smiled at Violet, while the phone was cradled between her ear and shoulder. It was to be a long conversation, the voice on the other end rising in pitch as Violet walked past to the kitchen.

“Hang on, Mavis. Violet, there is some cordial in the kitchen. Davey brought it. You can have some.”

While she sipped slowly on the cool drink, Violet opened the envelope to look at the letter confirming her employment. Fingering the two notes she wondered if she could get another pair of stockings, at least. Carefully putting the letter back into the envelope, she folded it and tucked it away. She washed Mrs Tilly’s lunch dishes, then took a broom to sweep outside the shop.

When she came back into the shop Mrs Tilly was in a mood to chat. “Davey is such a lovely boy. His uncle, Mr Henkelman, owns the shop. He doesn’t have any sons, only girls. So Davey’s like his son. It’s a shame, really, he has this shop and the one in Norwood.

Lovely boy, but he is at university now, with all those funny types and their ideas. Don't know why. His uncle, I am sure, will leave the business to him."

Violet smiled and nodded.

The next day, Beatrice said she couldn't visit. Sweeping the shop and pavement, Violet felt light-headed as car after car and buses and trucks moved relentlessly past her, and the people walked past with not one looking at her. As she sipped her tea in the small kitchen at the back of the shop she felt such a deep loneliness, that she had not felt for years, not since those first few months after her mother had left home to work in Pretoria.

The clang of the shop's doorbell and the loud greeting of a man's voice brought Violet from the kitchen into the front shop. He handed Mrs Tilly papers, which she glanced at and signed.

"You need to check the delivery before you sign," he said to Mrs Tilly.

She stared at him for a long, hard moment, before saying: "Violet can do that. And I have told you, Enoch, you are to come through the back entrance. The front entrance is for customers."

"Yes, Madam," he said, taking the hat off his head and dipping his head slightly, but when Mrs Tilly turned to put the delivery note into a bulging file, he shook his head, a scowl on his face.

He walked through to the back of the shop. Violet followed him into the back alley, which had a door opening into a service lane where the delivery van was parked. He beckoned Violet over and when he opened the back doors of the vehicle it revealed a splash of colour — pale yellow buds and blood-red blooms with a soft scent Violet caught as she carried the flowers into the shop. She returned to the lane for another load of white and pink flowers with elongated petals packed together in layers; she bent to smell them but crinkled her nose at their disappointing smell.

"Those don't smell good. Chrysanthemum," Enoch said.

Violet said the word quietly to herself. Chrysanthemum.

There were sprigs of twiggy plants with tiny white flowers, and the daisies Violet knew from home, but these ones were in an array of colours that she hadn't seen before. Violet wondered who would buy all these flowers.

The man leaned against a wall in the lane and lit a cigarette. "You new here? How's the old lady?" nodding towards the shop.

"I started on Monday."

“Where were you working before?”

“I was at home.”

“Where’s that?”

“Lenyenye.”

Violet watched him pull slowly on his cigarette and exhale in one long breath.

“I better get on,” he said. But he didn’t. Instead, with his eyes closed, he tilted his head back up to the sun. He opened one eye, smiled and laughed. “The old bat is probably on the phone now to Henkelman complaining about me.”

Violet smiled at the deep soft sound of his laughter.

He crushed his spent cigarette under one boot. “Enoch. Enoch Sithole. And you are?”

“Violet Mahlangu.”

The sunflowers, Enoch had said, needed to be sold soon before they wilted. Violet suggested to Mrs Tilly putting them on the pavement outside the shop. Mrs Tilly, complaining of a headache as she dug her fingers into her forehead, waved at Violet, who took it to mean yes; by the end of the day the sunflowers were sold.

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CHAPTER SIX

Keturia had waited until three o'clock for Violet to visit. She had told Violet, when she left her at Sylvie Dlamini's house, to visit her the following Saturday after the shop closed at lunchtime. She had explained to her how to get to there, telling her the most direct route that required just two right turns, one at the end of Kotze Street into Joubert Street Extension, and then once she was two-thirds of the way down the hill, another right turn into the lane that ran to the nurses' home and the house where she worked.

That week waiting for Violet's visit was better than the ones before. But Violet didn't arrive. By mid-afternoon Keturia, who had been unsure whether to walk to the shop herself or continue waiting in case Violet did arrive, only to find her not there, finally decided to see for herself if the shop was closed. It was, along with all the other stores, and with no shoppers about, the Saturday afternoon street had a hollowness to it and the few cars that drove by seemed louder than usual. Those who ambled about were mostly in pairs, couples holding hands or others walking side by side with comfortable ease.

Keturia walked back to her room at the Dickensons. The heavy hurt of her loneliness, which she had kept at bay since Violet's arrival in Johannesburg, returned so strongly that tears welled up in her eyes and before she could blink them away they had run down her cheeks. She worried that Violet may have run into trouble. Then she told herself it was just a minor matter of a miscommunication over a visit. She could see her daughter another weekend. But when she was back in her room, sitting on the sagging bed, she bent her head and wept.

The next Saturday, Keturia waited in the lane behind the shop for it to close. It was past one o'clock but Violet had not yet come out. She had planned for the two of them to walk, but she wasn't sure if Violet would agree. She was surprised by the warm smile her daughter gave her when she looked up at Keturia's greeting. Her anger and worry at Violet's absence

evaporated when she saw the deep, dark smudges under her daughter's eyes, and recognised the weariness in her body. They walked back to the house, where they sat in Keturia's room, brewing tea on her stove and listening to the radio. It was one of the best Saturday afternoons Keturia had had in a long time.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lily started on Poppy as soon she arrived at school and had put her bag on its designated hook on the outside wall beneath the classroom window. Each hook had a picture of an animal, insect, bird or sea creature pasted above it, chosen by Mrs Pleasant at the beginning of the school year. Lily, Jessica and Jane were a flamingo, a swan and a swallow. But Poppy's hook, knocked into the wall the day after she arrived, didn't have an animal. Mrs Pleasant, who stood with Poppy outside the classroom on her first day of school while the maintenance man hammered the hook into the wall, said, when he had finished, that she had selected all the animals at the beginning of the school year, and there were none left to choose from.

"What happened to your nose, Poppy?" Lily said.

Poppy touched her nose.

"A spider bite you? A dog bit you?" Jane said.

"Maybe a rhino bashed her in the face," Lily said, no longer talking to Poppy.

Jessica and Jane laughed, their mouths stretched wide, their noses scrunched up.

Poppy laughed too, which made the three girls stop, unsure of how to take the look of derision in her eyes. Seeing her opportunity, Poppy said: "You should take a look at yourselves when you laugh like that. It's really ugly."

Lily turned to her reflection in the classroom window and smiled at herself.

The name rhino swept through the school and as more children sought out Poppy during the next two days to inspect her face her nose seemed to swell.

On Thursday when she got to school there was a small piece of paper stuck above the hook for her bag. The word rhino was written on it and she noticed a cluster of children watching her and giggling. She left it there.

The bell for the end of second break had rung, but Poppy remained in the bathroom looking at her nose in one of the small mirrors above the basins. The mark on her nose was turning yellow. She touched it and gasped in pain, tears springing into her eyes. A teacher

popped her head in and told her to hurry up. She splashed cold water on her face. Mrs Pleasant was already at her desk, but she was more interested in finishing the biscuits piled onto a small plate she had brought from the staff room than in Poppy's late arrival from break.

It was as if summer had decided to return, by mid morning the chill on the walk to school had given way to bright, baking sunshine. With the heat building up towards noon, the sweat under Poppy's thighs made her legs itch. She tried to breathe through the smell of hot bodies, sugar and dust on her palms and the sourness of Brian's breath after his lunch of polony sandwiches and Oros. They were crammed together, Brian and Poppy, scratching answers to the nine times table in blank squares. Poppy was finished but kept her eyes on her worksheet, otherwise Mrs Pleasant would tell her to continue onto the next page.

She had learned the times tables last year, drummed into her by her mother as they squatted in the vegetable garden picking snails off the undersides of pumpkin leaves. They threw them over the low fence onto the hard-baked soil to crack their shells, leaving the soft useless remains for the birds.

"Dennis, open a window," Mrs Pleasant said, and the tallest boy scraped back his chair to fetch the long wooden pole that stood upright in a corner of the classroom.

It had a brass loop on one end that fitted over a hook on each of the high windows. The class watched in silence at the pole waved around wildly as Dennis stepped over school bags and squeezed between desks, and then took one hand off the pole to push his glasses up his shiny nose. As the metal loop tapped against a windowpane, a small gasp escaped from Mrs Pleasant, but the window remained intact. Then he caught the hook and pushed. At first, the window wouldn't open but then its stiff horizontal hinge gave way, letting in more sound than fresh air. Poppy heard the crack of axes splitting wood and the rip of a branch as it tore from a tree trunk, followed by the long, short and long again whistles of men working.

Men with axes had arrived earlier that week and stood in the grove of pine trees at the nurses' home. As Poppy left for school they had started cutting the trees.

Poppy wiped her palms, slick with sweat, on her dress and tried to stop thinking of her mother's threat to call the men taking down the pine trees up into their garden to cut down her Belhambra.

Lily, in the front row was leaning into Jane, whispering. Jane turned to look at Poppy and then turned to share her laugh with Lily. Poppy touched her nose; she coughed to cover her involuntary gasp as pain shot up into her forehead.

"All right, back to work," said Mrs Pleasant.

As Poppy bent over her book, she heard the whisper of "rhino" followed by snorts of suppressed laughter. She looked at Brian's thin fingers struggling to form the numbers into neat curves and lines. His answers were mostly different to hers. Poppy looked into his ear. It was smudged with dirt on the outside and a glob of wax rested inside his ear. His shirtsleeves were marked with grey streaks. Did his mother not check he was clean? Then, looking at her school dress, she saw a smear of what looked like jam and a blob of ink. She rubbed her neck at a sharp prick. Then she felt another sting, she turned to see Frank blowing through what looked like a straw. This time the prick was on her cheek. A pin fell on the floor. As she turned back round to face the front she saw Brian looking at her answers. She caught his eye and he smiled at her.

"Poppy, you are not to ask anyone for the answers," Mrs Pleasant called, and those in front turned to look at her. "You can stay after class if you don't understand, you couldn't have got this far at your farm school."

Poppy felt a hot rush to her face. She heard a gasp and a gurgle behind her and when she turned, she saw Frank with his mouth wide open trying to dislodge something from his throat. On his desk was a tightly rolled piece of paper that he had been blowing the pins through. Mrs Pleasant stood up in alarm as Frank pulled a pin and with it a slimy string of spit streaked with blood from deep inside his mouth. A hard laugh erupted from Poppy as she saw the alarm in Frank's eyes.

"Poppy, we do not laugh when one of our classmates get hurt. Go to Mr Higgins' office," Mrs Pleasant said as she ushered the boy out the classroom.

Poppy walked behind Frank and Mrs Pleasant as she tut-tutted him to the sick room. But she let them get ahead, wondering if she could stretch the walk to the office until the bell rang for the end of the school day. The veranda that ran the length of the Standard 2 classrooms was cool. Poppy took the six polished red steps and then turned right along a covered walkway that went past the sickroom. With the door wide open she could see Frank with the school nurse bending towards him, pushing a flat stick down against his tongue while she peered into his mouth. He was gagging. Poppy smiled at him.

Pinned on a noticeboard in the foyer was a newspaper article about the school's opening at the beginning of the year. It surprised Poppy that even Lily and Jane and Jessica were new. The groups of girls gathered on the edge of the field at break seemed to know each other from a long time ago. A glass cabinet next to the noticeboard had one trophy on the top shelf, but there was no inscription on it.

At the secretary's office, she was unsure what to do. She stood at the doorway until the secretary nodded her head, indicating she should take a seat. Poppy still didn't know her name.

"Do you want me to call your mother? Are you ill?"

"I was told to see Mr Higgins."

She nodded and carried on typing. When Mr Higgins opened his office door a rectangle of bright light hurt Poppy's eyes. He walked past Poppy collected papers off the secretary's desk and returned to his office, closing the door quietly.

The secretary's office was now darker, but she carried on typing. "Is your mother working?"

Poppy was unsure the question was directed at her.

"I think women should work. Not rely on a man to pay for everything. Have something to do. Not just sit around the house drinking. Tea, drinking tea."

Poppy gave her the stare she used for the postman. Bella had taught her the blank, hard look that she used to repel unwanted attention. Poppy wasn't sure it was working on the secretary.

"I hear they're building tennis courts near your house," the woman continued.

"Yes," Poppy said, but she had no idea about any tennis courts.

She watched the woman's mouth as soft wet sounds escaped from her lips while she typed. She thought of her mother. The glimpse Poppy had caught of her the previous morning as she crept past her open bedroom door. Asleep, her mouth open, a wet stain on the pillow beneath her head.

At the farm Poppy's mother had been up early to make breakfast before school, and if a heavy overnight rain had made the road impassable or her father had taken the bakkie to tend to something on the other side of the farm, she was happy for Poppy to stay home. Once the rain lifted Poppy then sat on a piece of cardboard, pulling weeds that came out the ground with satisfying ease. Or she helped clear out cupboards and repack them, or hang wet sheets taut on the line in the blazing sun, the water that dripped from them disappearing rapidly into the hot ground.

When they were done they sat on the front steps dipping biscuits into steaming cups of tea. You had to say one thousand slowly. If you said one thousand, two thousand, three thousand, the biscuit broke as you lifted it out of the tea, the soggy bits sinking to the bottom of the cup. With the tea finished and any wet crumbs thrown on the ground for the birds, her mother would lean back against the step behind her, smoking. They sometimes played the

piano or lay on the stoep — each to a bench made comfortable with cushions — to read as they waited for the heat to pass. The piano had come with them to Johannesburg, but Poppy didn't think anyone had played it since they had moved.

Mr Higgins walked back out of his office. He hesitated in front of Poppy. "Well, you better come in."

Poppy walked into his office, stopping in front of a large wooden desk.

"How is your father? Enjoying the big city, I assume," he said, walking in behind her.

She wasn't sure what to say about her father. She didn't know Mr Higgins knew him.

"I play tennis with your dad at the club," he said, fidgeting behind her.

She turned around and was surprised to see many small pots on a long low cabinet against the wall, each with an odd shaped plant, like little trees.

She walked closer.

"Lovely, hey," he said, standing next to her. "Ficus, that one," he said, pointing to one plant with a bulbous base and a small mop of leaves at the top.

That meant nothing to Poppy. They fell silent, Mr Higgins bending over one small plant, wiping the small leaves with his thumb.

"What are they?"

"Trees."

Poppy smiled at his joke.

"Really. Bonsai trees. It's a Japanese thing. You trim them into these shapes before they get big, and it keeps them small. It's an art."

Poppy walked along the cabinet inspecting them, some had trunks that intertwined, another looked like a miniature pine tree.

"It's amazing. Perfect replicas. This one even gets tiny fruit."

She didn't believe him.

"It's odd. I still don't understand it. The ficus grows into such a huge tree with roots that get into water pipes and can break walls, but look how I've kept it so small."

Poppy stopped in front of the largest one, with a wide, almost flat-topped crown and a particularly crooked trunk.

"That one's my favourite," he said.

She bent down to inspect it closely, wishing she was small enough to be hidden in its miniature canopy.

"My wife doesn't like them, so I keep them here. Well, we actually don't have space at home, anyway."

She noticed him looking at the faded bruise on her left wrist. She covered it with her right hand and then saw him looking at a similar bruise on her right wrist. She folded her arms behind her.

He walked to his desk. Poppy stood on the other side waiting while he stacked papers into neat piles.

He looked up and started. “What happened to your nose, Poppy?”

Poppy pressed the tip, having forgotten, since the throb had subsided, that it was so tender. She tried not to wince as her fingertips touched it.

“That looks nasty. A spider bite, or did you fall off your bicycle?”

She nodded.

He rested his elbows on the desk, drumming his fingers together, his gaze wandering past her. Poppy listened to the ticking of the clock, the clicking of the typewriter in the office next door. She looked down at her shoes that sank into the thick carpet and then up as Mr Higgins cleared his throat. But he took it no further. Poppy kept her eyes on a painting on the wall behind his head of a dirt road bending away into the distance, veld on either side and a small house near a clump of trees. A lump formed in her throat.

“Well, come back to school when it’s healed,” he said.

In the foyer she stopped in front of a mirror to inspect her face and tears welled up in her eyes that she brushed away quickly. She walked out through the double doors, up the gravel path and out of the school gates. A teacher loading exercise books into her car looked at her but didn’t ask her where and why she was going before the end of the school day.

Only when Poppy came past the Queen Vic did she remember that her school bag was still in the classroom. She didn’t think there was anything in it she would miss, except *Little Women*. She thought Beth might die, but then she thought not, otherwise the book would be too sad. In the lane, Poppy sat on a ledge that jutted out from the wall from where she could see into her garden. The Belhambra was still standing.

There was no sign anyone was at home. But she couldn’t be certain. Keturia could be round the back and her mother in her bedroom lying down. Poppy opened the gate slowly, stopping midway before the whine started. But it still creaked as the bottom hinge stiffened. She waited. Nobody came round the side of the house. She quickly climbed the Belhambra tree, letting out a deep breath when she was high up, sitting astride a branch, her back against the trunk.

And that is when she saw the tops of most the pine trees gone. More than the tops — huge chunks of log were scattered on the ground and what was left of the trees were large

thick upright poles, some still with small branches sticking out the sides. Poppy could see the ugly back of the nurses' home, with pipes running down towards the ground and dark stains on the walls. A crack of an axe began again followed by a hard thud as branches hit the ground and then a soft whoosh as the fallen sprigs of pine needles settled. She could see down the hill now, where Joubert Street Extension met Empire Road. At one of the open windows in the nurses' home a young woman stood, looking beyond and behind Poppy towards the prison or Hillbrow.

A pigeon above Poppy strutted up and down a branch, bobbing as it went. It took flight as a high-pitched voice called: "I can see you."

Poppy looked up at the window where the woman had stood. But she was gone. She sat still.

"Poppy, I can see you in the tree."

Poppy peered down through the branches into the garden. She couldn't see him, but she now knew the voice. Brian.

"I have your satchel."

"You are not allowed in my garden," she said as she came down the tree.

"It's not your garden."

How did he know they were renting the house?

"Anyway, I'm not in the garden. I am in the lane," Brian said.

"Well, lanes are for walking."

"OK, here I'm walking," he said, as he marched up and down on the other side of the fence, while telling Poppy that Mrs Pleasant had farted when she had returned to the class and in the panic to open more windows, Dennis had broken a window pane, the glass flew all over the classroom and a huge sliver cut a gash down one side of Lily's face from her forehead over her eye and all the way down her cheek and there was blood everywhere, rivers of it, and Lily screamed and screamed because she knows she will have a scar there for the rest of her life.

Poppy tried the stare on him but it didn't work because she couldn't help laughing.

"Can I have some juice?" Brian said, as he climbed over the fence. "Your bag is heavy, what do you keep in there?"

"We have a gate, you know," Poppy said.

He was walking to the house.

"My mom is sick. Let me get the juice. Stay here."

Poppy returned with a packet of Marie biscuits under her arm and two cups of juice, some of which she spilled as she rushed back into the garden. They walked down the driveway and sat on the pavement outside the gate and as they watched the men cut the trees they dipped their biscuits into the juice, saying one thousand, two thousand, three thousand.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Felicity stood at the basin, holding it hard to still her shaking hands. She raised them and held them out, watching the trembling she could not contain. The fury that had surged through her body a few moments ago had left her feeling weak. She carefully slipped her rings off to rinse them. A faint tinge of red coloured the water as it drained away. She sat on the closed toilet, the drip of the tap and the cold, quiet bathroom calming her. A cloth Poppy had used to wipe the blood off her face lay limp in the bath, a thread of brownish-coloured water ran from it along the bottom of the bath to the drain. Felicity felt a surge of irritation swelling up again and then it subsided. She shouldn't have made Poppy go to school afterwards, with her nose red and raw.

She didn't know now if she would have stopped, if Keturia had not pulled Poppy away. She was ashamed of the ragged scream she had released up the passage, and hoped the neighbour had not heard. If she had, Felicity told herself, it could be from the prison next door. She laughed, a feeble sound. The prison.

She lay down on her bed to sleep. But her mind turned in one direction and then doubled back in another direction. The rage rose up again. She would walk. She didn't want Keturia to see her. She waited until she was sure Keturia was in the lounge and walked down the passage to the kitchen, but Keturia was there sweeping the floor. She didn't look up as Felicity stopped in the kitchen doorway, holding the swing door open with her foot. Bloody stupid door, Felicity thought. She took her handbag from the kitchen counter and walked out the back door, while Keturia focused on the broom strokes on the floor, as she worked her way around the kitchen table.

She walked up the lane. It was quieter than Joubert Street Extension, with the buses and trucks that took forever to get to the top. But when she reached the end of the lane and stepped onto Kotze Street the noise was there. She walked with her head down, with no plan as to where she was going. Keturia should not have got involved. She's Poppy's mother. At the farm her staff had known to leave the house.

She walked to the station and into it, her heels tapping on the hard floor of the wide concourse, until she stopped in the centre. People walked on around her as she wondered if she took a train where could she go. But she couldn't stay there long, with everyone watching her. As she left she cast a look at herself in the glass panel of a door, unsure now if she had checked her face before leaving the house. Near the station was a large park. Felicity walked along the paths that ended at a pond with a fountain in it. She had forgotten her hat and found a bench in the shade of a pine tree to sit, the scent of it and the buildings rising up around the park, suddenly overwhelming her.

CHAPTER NINE

Supper at the Dickensons was at six o'clock. The round table in the dining room was set with four places, each with two forks, two knives, a soup spoon, a desert spoon and a side plate on which lay a serviette rolled into a silver napkin holder. Poppy set the table while Keturia finished cooking. She chose the dark green napkins with small orange daisies embroidered in each corner, similar to the flowers that grew out of clumps of elongated leaves in the hardest and rockiest soil at the farm. These daisies were tiny, but the orange thread shone, even in the dull light of the dining room, just like the gazanias at the farm. The napkins were made of a coarse fabric, scratchy to touch, and didn't roll well. Her mother hated them. The tablecloth had a stain from last night's supper, which she covered with a placemat. Even in this dark room, made gloomier with its table and matching sideboard stained black, she didn't want to take a chance of her mother noticing the stain. The cream wallpaper laid the week after they had moved in had not helped to lighten the room and the sun remained trapped between the net curtain and the window.

It was before five o'clock, but Poppy came in early hoping the mouse she had seen the day before was still beneath the floorboards, not yet awake for its evening excursion. The creature and its long tail had flown so fast under the sideboard it looked as if it was airborne, skimming just above the carpet. As she worked her way around the table, she stamped on the worn green carpet, the cutlery tinging as she pounded the floor until her mother shouted down the passage for her to stop. On the table was a small silver bell that Poppy had not seen before. She lifted it from its holder and listened to its high tinkle. Keturia walked into the dining room and seeing Poppy with the bell turned back into the kitchen clicking her tongue.

The table still needed glasses but Poppy ran out the back door and around the side of the house towards the lane, to meet her father on his way from the old tennis courts on Sam Hancock Street. He played after work, stopping at the house to change before heading to the courts. From up in the Belhambra tree she could track his progress home as he walked across the rugby field. She saw him striding along, his long shadow keeping pace. Somebody called

him and he stopped to wait for a man to reach him. Standing near one post, where the grass was worn away, the two men stood talking.

Poppy watched a line of pigeons on the top of the prison wall, emitting a bubbling sound as they bobbed up and down; a couple walked down the lane and to the nurses' home. The windows of the building were dark against the late-afternoon sun. When she looked back to the field, the two men were gone. There was no sign of her father in the lane, and when she saw the curtains in her parents' bedroom pulled closed sharply she realised he must be in the house already, changing for dinner.

When the clock chimed six, they were seated, each in their place. Felicity stood to serve the soup. Her hands were shaking and Bella rose and took over.

"Still not feeling well?" Harold asked Felicity.

She didn't answer.

After the soup was salad, a wedge of tomato, iceberg lettuce and slices of thick-cut cucumber with the bitter peel that Poppy struggled to eat. She looked up to see her mother watching her and realised she was using the wrong knife and fork for the salad.

It had never mattered at the farm, even when they had visitors. The adults drank and laughed over stories that had been told many times before, Felicity not noticing stains from the meal on the tablecloth or how Mr Van Heerden left his napkin unfolded on the table. It was the Van Heerdens who usually visited, every second month for lunch that sometimes stretched into a dinner of leftovers and an overnight stay. Poppy and their daughter Sarah served the dessert in the kitchen, dishing up small portions for the adults which they carried through to the dining room then returning to the kitchen, helping themselves to seconds and thirds of the baked custard. But the visits had stopped, Poppy now realised, long before they left the farm. She wondered again what Sarah had meant when she said to Poppy, on the last visit, that she hoped Poppy's mother would get better.

Poppy chewed slowly, waiting. But Felicity said nothing, instead lifting the bottle of wine.

Harold took the bottle from her and filled her glass. "Pops, I saw Mr Higgins when I came back from the courts this evening. Everything all right at school? He said you were sent to his office today."

Felicity looked up sharply.

"You didn't tell your mother?"

"I was watching the trees. They're cutting down the pine trees near the Queen Vic," Poppy said.

"Did you see Poppy this afternoon, Felicity?"

"She runs around all over the show. I don't know where she goes," Felicity said.

"Higgins asked about Poppy's nose."

Felicity ran her thumb and forefinger around her ring, sliding the stone set on it beneath her finger and closing her palm. It was that stone that had cut Poppy's nose. "She needs to behave."

"But hitting her on the face?"

"She broke the bloody milk bottles, dropped them on the driveway. Always rushing around."

Harold winced at the word bloody. "Higgins said she shouldn't come back to school until it's healed. Her nose could be broken. You better take her to the doctor tomorrow, to have it looked at."

"Bella can take her after school."

"You will take her tomorrow morning."

Poppy watched her father. Even in the dimness of the dining room she could see blood beneath his skin flooding into his cheeks, leaving the tip of his nose white. His body was rigid.

"What if it was Bella's face?" he said.

"I wouldn't hit Bella," Felicity said.

Poppy felt the hard knot of a sob in her throat that she tried to swallow away, but all through the fish and peas and boiled potato it sat there making it hard to eat.

The rest of the meal was eaten in silence. Poppy counted as she chewed, for each mouthful she counted to seven. As she finished her last mouthful, she looked up in surprise at the shrill sound of the bell Felicity was ringing, bringing Keturia from the kitchen to clear their plates.

Harold turned on Felicity as soon as Keturia left the dining room with the plates. He held the small bell in his hand, covering it entirely, his grip so tight Poppy thought the only way he could let it go was with equal force. "Who do you think you are, the Queen of England?"

"Harold, every one has one here. How must Keturia know when we are finished and it's time to collect the dishes."

Poppy expected her father to fling the bell across the room. But Harold set it gently down into the little silver dish that fitted the bell so snugly. "Keturia is not going to stay to wash the dishes. We have two daughters who can do it."

Poppy stood at the bathroom basin with Bella behind her. She noticed Bella's hands were shaking as she brushed Poppy's hair. She caught her sister's eye in the mirror above the basin and smiled at her. Bella bent down and kissed the top of Poppy's head. Once Poppy was in bed, her sister pulled the thin yellow candlewick bedspread up below her chin and she sat next to her on the bed, her head bowed, her right hand resting on Poppy's legs.

"What happened to the Van Heerdens?" Poppy asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Why did they stop coming to visit us?"

"You don't remember?"

"What?"

"Dad and Uncle Eli had that fight."

"Really? When? What about?"

Bella shrugged.

Poppy sat up in bed. "What was the fight about?"

"Dad was going on about the government and how stupid they were, and then they had a fight."

"And Mom?"

"What about her?"

"Did the fight have something to do with Mom?"

Bella looked past Poppy as if remembering something. "Maybe."

"What about Mom?"

"Come on, it's time to go to sleep."

Poppy lay down. Bella switched off the lamp and sat on Poppy's bed. With the light from the passage, Poppy could see her sister close her eyes. Poppy did the same and they listened to singing, a low deep sound coming in on the breeze that wafted through the open window.

CHAPTER TEN

Keturia lay in bed listening to the wind rush down the lane. It was so persistent that she couldn't hear any bird calls, the single sharp sounds that first signalled morning before the grey light began to seep through the garden. She checked her clock. As she rose, she drew in a fast breath at the sharp pain in her lower back. She waited for it to subside and then got out of bed. The mattress sagged in the middle, and the small blanket she had folded to compensate for the dip did not help make it more comfortable. She had forgotten last night to fill the enamel basin with water. She stepped outside, peering into the darkness. The early-morning air was cool. She quickly stepped outside and then into the toilet next to her room to fill a jug from the tap at the basin. The toilet door did not lock and the bare bulb in the high ceiling provided little light. She avoided looking at the darkness of the deep pit of the toilet.

Back in her room she washed quickly in water that was too cold and then dressed in an overall and apron. She wrapped a scarf over her hair. It would take too long to boil water, she would wait for after their breakfast to have her tea. Before she stepped out of her room she stood on an overturned box to reach the latch on the high window, opening it to air the room from the now stale smell of supper she had cooked for herself the night before.

The light was already on in the kitchen when Keturia walked across the yard to start work. An ashtray with two crushed half-smoked cigarettes and a teacup were on the table next to a newspaper. Mr Dickenson usually smoked in the garden, leaving the cigarette ends in a can on top of the dustbin.

She had heard crying last night. Wailing that she thought was Poppy, but as she listened closely to pinpoint the cries she realised she had yet to hear the sound of Poppy's crying.

With the grind, stop and then grind again of the milk van, she left the kitchen and walked around the house and down the driveway to fetch the bottles. She was careful this time to pick up one bottle at a time and wipe the condensation off the glass with her apron, before setting it down and doing the same with the second bottle. Although it hadn't only been the wet bottles that had caused them to slide from her hands. It was the sudden sound of

hard footfalls in the dim morning light as someone ran down the small road in front of the house. She had heard his hard breathing, ragged, as if he was scared.

This morning a bird had been at the milk top, its first attempts showing with small indents in the foil before it had succeeded in piercing the lid. Keturia would decant some of it into a jug for the breakfast table. Bella would pour the entire bottle down the drain if she knew a bird had taken a sip.

"Morning, Keturia," said Mr Dickenson, winding down the window of his car as it edged down the driveway. "I am going into work early, I'll be back later to take Poppy to the doctor. She won't be at school today. Make sure she is ready by 11."

In the kitchen Keturia drained the scummy cold water out of the sink and ran the tap until steam rose from the sink, then she put the plug in to wash the dinner dishes. She topped up the kettle and switched it on, before going into the dining room to fetch the tablecloth. The napkins were lying scrunched and stained on the table and the chairs, usually pushed in, were out, one at an odd angle as if someone had run from the room.

"Morning, Ketty," Bella said as she came into the dining room dressed for school.

Keturia nodded to Bella as she set the chairs in their place and opened the curtains. The silver bell was lying on the carpet beneath the window. She picked it up and both her and Bella stopped briefly at its high tinkle. She set the bell on the sideboard, but as she left the dining room she saw Bella put it in the cupboard below.

"My Mom is not well. I think she'll be in bed today. Poppy too. I'll see you later," Bella said.

"Come have breakfast before you go," Keturia said.

Bella winced, her hand on her stomach. "Oh, I am not hungry."

"I'll make you sandwiches. Take a few apples. Have some tea, the kettle's boiled."

Keturia added an extra spoon of sugar to Bella's tea and put the tin of rusks out for her. As she dried and packed away the dishes she watched the girl. There was a deep furrow between her eyebrows, a groove that didn't entirely disappear even when she saw Keturia looking at her and smiled.

"Should I get anything on the way home? Do we need anything?" Bella said.

"More rusks, and some potatoes and onions. Should I cook the mutton tonight? We have three carrots, that should be enough."

"Let's just have the stew tonight. No soup."

"What must I do with the peaches?"

They both looked at the peach slices swimming in syrup that had been decanted from a tin into a cut crystal bowl for desert after supper the night before.

"Let Poppy have them for breakfast. She loves those peaches," Bella said.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sitting in the back seat of the car in the warm mid-morning sun, Poppy wished they could keep on driving forever. They were heading north on Jan Smuts Avenue. Her father turned left off the road just before the zoo into a road lined with tall trees.

"Look at these trees, Dad, they're huge."

The canopy over the road was thick with brown and red leaves that would soon be shed but there were gaps letting through shafts of sunlight onto the road, flashing in Poppy's eyes as her father drove slowly, peering forward to see the numbers on the houses. Poppy could see into some of the gardens over low walls or through wrought-iron garden gates. Most had trimmed lawns and in some flowers were blooming against the stone base of the houses.

On the pavement a little boy on a tricycle was struggling to keep up with a woman walking ahead. She stopped and turned to wait, smiling at him.

"Excuse me, we're looking for 59, Dr Dee," Harold said, after he had stopped the car and stretched across the passenger seat to wind down the window.

The woman leaned forward. "Just past the bend, on your left. There's no number. It's on the next corner."

Poppy had scooted to the left-hand side of the back seat to listen to the conversation. The little boy looked at her blankly. She did the same to him. The woman smiled at Poppy, but it stopped short of reaching her eyes when she registered Poppy's swollen nose.

"She fell off her bike. Hope it isn't broken," said Harold.

She nodded and walked on, the little boy pedalling in front of her.

The gate of the doctor's house was set directly on the corner between two posts and a privet hedge that ran the length of two sides of the property. A dog rushed at them as they walked into the garden and an old man bent double with a trowel in his hand stood up and peered at them. "Can I help you?"

"Dr Dee? I'm Harold. Harold Dickenson. I telephoned this morning for an appointment. This is Poppy."

He turned to walk to the house. Four steps led up to a front door, but the doctor bypassed it and walked along a narrow veranda that ran around the house. They followed him to another door that led into a large room crammed with a wide desk, armchairs, a sofa, and a coffee table with books stacked on and under it. Ash lay in the fire place, the smell of it hung in the air.

"Well, let's see," Dr Dee said, turning to Poppy, who he had told to sit on a high narrow metal-frame bed. He touched her nose, surprising Poppy with his gentle touch.

"What happened here?" he asked.

"She fell out of a tree," Harold said.

"I see. And when did this happen, young lady?'

"A few days ago," Harold answered.

"What time was that?" the doctor asked.

"What time was what?" Harold asked.

"What time of the day did you fall out of the tree Poppy?" the doctor asked.

Neither Poppy nor Harold answered.

Dr Dee rummaged on his desk, lifting papers and moving books before he found what he was looking for. He shone the light from a tiny torch into Poppy's nose. "What time did you fall out of the tree?" the doctor asked.

Poppy didn't know what to say.

"Oh, she was in the tree before school. She's up there all the time," Harold said.

"So you fell out the tree in the morning, before school, and then still went to school," the doctor asked as he inspected her forearms, feet and calves. "No scratches here. That was lucky. Just the nose then," he said.

The doctor shone a small lamp attached to the wall above the examination bed onto her wrists. When he turned over her hands the faint bruises were more visible on the pale underside of her wrist.

Harold shifted from foot to foot, and looked at his watch.

"What time do you get up, Poppy?" Dr Dee asked.

Poppy looked at her father and he nodded for her to answer. "I think half past six."

"And what time does school start?"

"We have to be there by half past seven."

"So you get dressed, eat breakfast and still have time to climb a tree before school?" the doctor said.

"Oh, we live right next door to school," Harold said.

"Ah, well, that's convenient," the doctor said. He scrawled on a piece of paper and handed it to Harold. "All right get this ointment. Apply three times a day and bring her back next week, so I can see how it's healing."

"Is it broken? Her nose?" Harold asked.

"I don't think so. But bring her in next week so I can be sure. Once the swelling is down I will be able to assess it better. Should we set the appointment for next week now?"

"Let me rather call on Monday to fix a time."

The doctor walked them out and as they drove off Poppy turned back to see him standing at his gate watching them as they went.

CHAPTER TWELVE

As Violet's first weeks in her new home and job wore on, each evening seemed to be colder than the one before. The peach tree in the back garden shed its leaves in just a few days. The air was so dry that Violet's skin itched infuriatingly, and the dust in the roads in Meadowlands marked her shoes, the grit sticking in grooves that she struggled to clean. Her eyes stung in the early evening from the smoke of thousands of stoves lit earlier now as she made her way home in the dark.

Violet woke to the deep darkness of their room. Looking up at the window she could see no light leaking through the curtain. She listened. No bird calls, only Beatrice's soft breath. She turned over and bent her knees up to ease the pressure on her bladder; it could be hours before the sun rose. She could smell the chamber pot under the bed, but she didn't want to go fumbling in the dark and risk knocking it over. She searched for the scarf she had wrapped around her feet at bedtime that had now unravelled. The one blanket had not been enough to keep her warm, and the thick seams of her coat that she had slept in to keep warm were now digging into her upper arms.

A bird call pierced the quiet night, then the banging of a door a way off, a call and a returning shout. People were getting up. Violet edged out of bed, and finding her shoes, crept out the back door to the toilet, her need for relief overcoming her worry of who may be hiding in the shadows in the yard.

Outside, the cold air rushed around her ankles. More familiar now with the rough patches and small dips in the uneven ground of the backyard she quickly found her way to the toilet. Once done, she walked back to the house quickly, but careful to make no noise. She closed the door quietly behind her and locked it. Once back in bed, despite the cold resting on her skin, she fell fast asleep, dreaming of trains and buses. It was Violet's first day off since arriving in Johannesburg.

Beatrice was whipping sheets and blankets off her bed, and as she yanked the curtains open icy air settled over Violet.

"Come on, V. Up. We have to get these washed. And do the house," Beatrice said.

"I need to sleep," Violet said.

"You didn't think because you pay rent you won't have chores here," Beatrice said.

Violet dozed off, surfacing every now and then to hear Beatrice opening and closing drawers or yanking the wardrobe door open. It suddenly went quiet. Lying there, she opened her eyes to see Beatrice slip a small book out the suitcase beneath her bed that had clothes spilling out of it. Beatrice held the book, stroking the cover with her thumb. She opened it and began reading, her forehead creasing, her eyes scanning the pages. Violet could no longer hold in the cough that was tickling her throat, startling Beatrice, who quickly shoved the book into the suitcase, covering it with clothes.

Violet sat up and swung her legs onto the floor, but with the scarf wrapped around her feet it was a clumsy manoeuvre, and she slipped. Lying there in a small heap, she laughed and so did Beatrice, the sun now a warm shaft of light in their room.

Beatrice directed progress. It was blankets first, to be washed in the galvanised metal tub that rested against the outside of the house most of the week. They took the longest to dry, so needed to be hung first, sheets next and then clothes. Kneeling next to the tub they washed hard, their hands wrinkled and raw in the icy water.

For rinsing the laundry, Violet brought fresh water in buckets from the tap at the back door, where, while she waited for the bucket to fill she had to answer questions from the woman next door, who was hanging up her laundry: where was she from, where was her mother, where was her father, did she have work, oh really, where?

Once the laundry was up on the line, Beatrice set Violet to dusting the living room. Here was the sideboard with two drawers and a cupboard below and shelves above on which sat three white bowls with a blue pattern running around the rim, the blue trim on each bowl showing a slight variation from the other.

"Don't break those," Beatrice said.

The photograph was no longer on the sideboard, as it had been when her mother and Ma Dlamini had sat here finalising arrangements. Violet lifted the cushions on the sofa, pounding them to dislodge dust before setting them firmly back. She swept the floor, kneeling down, on Beatrice's instructions, to get to the balls of fluff that had gathered far under the furniture. It didn't look like anyone had done much kneeling here for a while, Violet thought. Beatrice returned with the polish.

"Don't knock those bowls over," she said again.

Violet set to rubbing up the wooden armrests of the sofa that ended in grooved curls that caught the polish so that she had to shine it up slowly with her fingertip in a cloth. The sideboard she rubbed in wide strokes, but skipped the shelves, too nervous to touch the bowls. A drawer was slightly ajar. She tried to shut it but it stuck. She pulled it open further to smooth its path closed and there inside lay the photograph. She lifted it to look closely. She saw now that the man was next to a younger Ma Dlamini, who looked straight at the camera, her chin slightly raised, her forehead smooth. Her eyes had a shine. The man gazed beyond the photographer so intensely that Violet looked behind her.

Beatrice was standing at the door resting against the frame. "He's gone."

"Where?" Violet asked.

Beatrice shrugged and walked over. Taking the photograph from Violet, she put it back in the drawer and managed with a few small pushes to close it firmly.

In their bedroom Violet knelt with a dustpan and brush to clean under the beds. She had found a small space in the wall behind her bed, where a bit of broken brick had come loose. She had hidden her first week's wages in the crevice in the wall. She wasn't sure, once she paid the rent at the end of the month that there would be enough for a blanket. She tallied in her head how much she would have left after she had sent money to her granny. She also needed another pair of stockings now that winter was approaching. The soles of her shoes were starting to wear. She might need to get new shoes first. Beatrice had warned her not to skip the rent. Ma Dlamini gave no second chances. Once she had the blanket, she could send money home. Thick stockings and shoes would have to wait.

The suitcase under Beatrice's bed wouldn't close, it was so jammed with clothes that some spilled out onto the floor. As Violet repacked the clothes, she felt into the depths of the suitcase, pulling out two slim books. The titles were long and as she flicked through one, many of the words were unfamiliar.

"What are you doing?" said Beatrice.

Her sharp voice from the doorway startled Violet.

"Leave that," she said, as she took the two books and shoved them back in the case.

"The case wouldn't close," Violet said.

"Just sweep around it, I'll sort this out later," Beatrice said.

Violet knelt back on her feet, her legs aching.

"I don't like people going through my things," Beatrice said as she walked out the room.

"Well, you should have said so."

After Beatrice had left the room, Violet swept the dirt back under Beatrice's bed. When she came into the kitchen, Beatrice was sitting at the kitchen table reading a magazine while she peeled potatoes. Without lifting her eyes from the magazine, she told Violet to clean the kitchen. Plates and teacups had to be removed from the shelf above next the small window, the shelf wiped down and then the crockery repacked. Beatrice corrected her if she put the cups and saucers back onto the wrong shelf. A smaller cupboard was locked, and Beatrice said to leave it. Violet had seen the jars of jam and lemon curd on the top shelf, and the baking supplies below. Another warning from Beatrice not too touch or take.

"Ow," Beatrice gasped.

Violet looked over to see a small nick in Beatrice's finger filling with blood. She carried on brushing out the ash from the cold stove and stacking it with fresh coal.

Beatrice rinsed her finger under the tap outside, and when she came back in she lit the stove, bending down to blow on it so it would take, then set a pot on the stove to boil potatoes. "Ma will bring the meat, and add it later."

Violet did not respond.

"Oh cheer up. I'll make us tea. Then we'll have a bath," Beatrice said.

Violet, who had taken Beatrice's chair at the table, examined the pockmarks in her knees from the hours she had spent that morning kneeling while she cleaned.

"Come out with me later. We'll go down to Zee's house. He has a record player. We'll dance," Beatrice said. And as she set about getting out the teacups, she twirled in a perfect circle raised up slightly on the ball of her right foot.

Violet couldn't help smiling.

They sat on the back steps drinking the sweet strong tea Beatrice had made, their legs catching the sun while they watched a robin perched alert on the rim of a low fence that enclosed the compost heap.

"Beautiful B," a young man called.

He walked past the neighbour's house that backed on to Ma Dlamini's, and then reappeared around the other side to lean on the wire fence.

"Will you come out with me later?" he said.

"I'm busy," Beatrice said.

"Where you going to? Zee's?"

"No."

"Then where will I find you tonight?" he asked.

"We're baking with Ma Dlamini. It's Sli's graduation."

"That girl is getting too big with her brain. What? She going to be a lawyer?" he said.

As they talked, Violet watched the casual manner in which he leaned on the fence. The ease he had, the enjoyment he was having at teasing Beatrice. She looked away, not wanting him or Beatrice to see her interest in him.

"OK then, next Saturday?" he asked.

"I'll be busy again," she said.

"Who's your friend?" he said.

"Violet," Beatrice said.

"Oh Violet, I shall have to find out about Violet," he said.

He smiled at her, laughing as he walked off.

It was a chuckle Violet had heard before, on the night she and her mother arrived in Meadowlands. "Who is that?"

"Musa," Beatrice said.

Violet watched him as he approached three women coming up the road. She liked the way he walked. He was tall and slender. But the women he passed didn't stop at his greeting and when Violet turned to Beatrice, she was startled by the hard look in her eyes as she watched Musa until he had disappeared between the long line of houses that stretched as far as they could see.

"Stay away from him," Beatrice said.

"Why?"

"He's a blackjack. The police."

They hauled the tub into the kitchen and poured in pot after pot of boiling water. Beatrice bathed first, sending Violet to bring her this and that from the bedroom. An entire shelf in the wardrobe was jammed with scented soaps and tubs of cream, tubes of lipstick gathered in a small open tin and small glass jars of red and pink nail varnish. Violet made several trips to fetch the right items, a towel, a nail brush, a bar of pink soap wrapped in a red facecloth, and a jar of thick cream Beatrice smeared on her face before trying to lie back in the tub, the water lapping around her raised knees. Violet sat on a kitchen chair, reading the magazine, the steam in the small room rippling the pages.

"You should wear your blue dress tonight. I have the perfect belt for it. Perhaps my white cardigan as well. You need to buy better stockings," Beatrice said.

"Aren't we baking?" Violet said.

"Oh that. I just didn't want Musa to come to Zee's," Beatrice said.

The tub was rinsed and back in the yard when Ma Dlamini and her sons, Menzi and Lwazi, came in, weighed down by shopping bags out of which came a jar of sticky cherries, sugar, oil and small bottles of dark red and deep blue liquid. Ma Dlamini packed them away in her cupboard, locked it and then sat at the table chatting, while Beatrice cooked the meat that, when done, was dished up with steaming halved potatoes with butter and salt.

Beatrice set upon the atchar that Ma Dlamini produced. "Oh Ma, lovely. Did you go past Ebrahim's?"

"He finally gave me the recipe," Ma Dlamini said.

"After all this time," Beatrice said.

"He said I can't keep coming all that way just for a jar of pickled vegetables," Ma Dlamini said.

Beatrice looked at Ma Dlamini, who responded with a weak smile that faded quickly.

Violet looked at them, unsure of the taste of the atchar and what had passed between Ma Dlamini and Beatrice at the mention of Ebrahim.

As they were getting ready for bed, Violet asked: "How long have you lived here, Beatrice?"

"Ever since the Dlaminis came from Sophiatown."

"Sophiatown?"

"That's where we lived. Well, I didn't live with the Dlaminis then, but I knew them."

"What was he like, Mr Dlamini?"

"Always quiet. I never knew him that well, even then. But he changed when they came here. He hated it here."

"So why did they move?"

There was a silence.

"You don't know?"

"What?"

"Sophiatown was knocked down. Every house. Everyone had to leave. The government forced everyone out. They came with the police. The Dlaminis were moved here, Ebrahim to somewhere else."

Violet lay awake for a long while listening to Beatrice's breathing and knew she was still awake as well.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Violet and Enoch met as many times a week as they could for lunch. She walked three blocks from the florist to meet him and together they found a shady spot on a grassy verge to share their lunch. Violet brought fruit or biscuits she had baked, Enoch provided a cold drink or a serving from supper he had made the night before. Her favourite was the mutton stew he occasionally cooked. It was the easiest part of Violet's day. They sat in comfortable silence, and once they had finished their meal they watched people passing by, sometimes telling each other stories about those who walked by.

Today they watched a man with a deep scowl striding down the hill towards them, and after he had passed, Violet said he was rushing to the station to catch a train, following his wife, who two days before had been on her way to the butcher to buy lamb chops for his dinner. But instead of walking to the store and returning to cook his dinner, she had, without a second thought, bought a train ticket and travelled out of town. Enoch continued the story about the man, who was not perturbed about his wife's departure, except for the fact that he had not got his lamb chops for dinner. They laughed and then fell silent, enjoying the warm autumn sun.

Violet closed her eyes and listened to the sounds of the day around her. Snatches of conversations as two women walked by, their chatter becoming louder as they approached, and then the sounds of the conversation receding after they had walked on.

Enoch began again on his plans. He was saving to buy his own van to offer a delivery service to other florists, not only collecting flowers from the market for the Henkelmans' stores, he said.

Violet nodded as he recounted his meticulous savings plan. She looked at his left shoe, brightly polished, with the toes close now to wearing through. She knew the toe would have to be protruding before he bought a new pair. He had told her before that he would be able to buy hundreds of pairs of shoes for himself when his business was up and running and flourishing. There was no need to waste money on that now.

"What are your plans, Violet?" he said.

She looked at Enoch, a small furrow between her eyes.

"You weren't listening to me." He smiled. "I guess I do go on all the time about my delivery business. What are you plans? Start your own shop?"

She thought he was making a joke, making fun of her.

"You would be good at it."

"We can't own shops here."

"In Meadowlands?" But his voice trailed off.

"As a woman?" Violet was as surprised as Enoch at her sharp retort. "Ma Dlamini thought of that, but they are only giving a few licences to trade and only to men."

He nodded.

Violet watched him release his fists, stretching all ten fingers and then roll back his shoulders. "And I am not going to sell beer."

He looked at her with a smile, but it didn't reach his eyes.

Violet dusted herself off, and ignored Enoch's plea for her to stay a few minutes longer; she liked to give herself ample time to walk the few blocks back to the shop, arriving back at work before Mrs Tilly had started to look at her watch and then greeted Violet with an arched eyebrow.

Enoch drove out to Meadowlands on a Sunday to fetch Violet after church. They drove out along the open road, veld stretching from it on either side. The hum of the van lulled Violet into a daze, her mind wandering as she watched the landscape pass by. In one direction the grassy plain met a small koppie, in another it was punctuated by a thicket of trees. They didn't talk much, the soft silence between them needing no conversation to fill it. Enoch turned off the main road onto a dirt road. Soon after, they passed several small mud cottages with zinc roofs kept in place by large rocks. He turned again onto a track not much wider than a footpath, driving slowly on the rutted ground, the long brown grass brushing against the van. He stopped under a tree.

Violet looked him. "Where are we?"

He smiled. "Come, let me show you."

When they got out the car, they stood in the silence for a moment. Such quiet, no breeze or bird call.

"I came here as a child. Never forgot it. But I had no idea where it was. Then one day I delivered flowers to this farm for a wedding, all the way out here, and as I was driving along that road, I knew this was the place. It still took me a while to find the exact spot."

They walked through a forest, the ground littered with thick leaves, but others had come here as there was a path worn into the ground. When the path veered sharply to the left, Enoch led Violet off it, where they had to step onto the raised roots of tall trees. They came to a clearing next to a shallow stream, the sun warming a patch of grass. Violet set out the picnic. Enoch sat on a boulder to take off his shoes, and indicated to Violet to do the same. They waded into the shallow stream, and Violet gasped at the icy water that just covered her ankles. Taking care not slip on the rocks worn smooth by the water, she followed Enoch upstream where there was a deeper pool, the surface a dark blank.

Violet found a large sunny boulder to sit on and stretched out her legs.

Enoch threw a small pebble into the water, and they watched the ripples until they stopped. “Fancy a swim?”

She wiggled her toes: “In this freezing water? I can’t feel my feet. They are numb.”

He laughed. “Better to come in summer, I suppose.”

“Yes, let’s come again in summer to swim.”

“We’ll do that,” Enoch said, as he tossed another small stone into the pond.

She lay back and closed her eyes, listening to the occasional plop of a pebble being thrown into the pond. There was a rustle in the bushes bordering the stream, and when she opened her eyes to find the source, she saw a small brown and white bird darting from branch to branch, stopping here and there to forage for insects on the undersides of leaves. She checked for Enoch; he too was now lying down, his hat over his face, his feet splayed and his arms stretched out beside him as he soaked up the sun. She smiled and did the same, listening to the trickle of water slipping from the pool and running gently downstream.

The picnic was mutton stew sandwiches and Enoch had a brought a small iced cake.

“You baked this?” Violet asked.

He nodded.

“Who taught you to cook so well?”

He didn’t answer.

Violet saw the distant look in his eyes, as if he was going back in his mind to an uncomfortable place.

Then he shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.” He forced a smile. “At least something good came out of it.”

Violet didn’t know what the it or the good was that he referred to.

He saw the question in her eyes.

"You like my cooking." He lay back on the picnic blanket and covered his face with his hat. "A positive outcome, you could say."

She leant back against the picnic basket and closed her eyes.

Voices coming from the other side of the stream startled them. They listened as they receded, but then grew louder again, coming closer. A wind came up and the voices were gone. Violet shivered in the shade now cast by the surrounding trees as the afternoon light began to weaken.

"We should get going," Enoch said.

As they stepped into the forest at the edge of the clearing to head back to the van, four white boys came through the undergrowth on the other side of the stream. They waded through the water and walked into the clearing, where moments before Violet and Enoch had been picnicking. Violet looked at Enoch, who told her with his eyes to keep quiet. As Violet watched them walking through the clearing, she realised they were older than boys, becoming teenagers, with the confidence of men. They walked in the opposite direction of where Violet and Enoch stood in the deep shadows. The smallest one complained of the load he was carrying, so they stopped and the fishing rods and bags were distributed between the three taller boys. As they carried on walking, the smallest one took a tennis ball from his pocket and threw into the air.

Violet made to move but Enoch put his hand on her arm and when she looked at him, he shook his head. She looked back into the clearing. The smaller boy had dropped his ball, and had called the others back to help him find it. As they searched through the grass and undergrowth, the forest where Violet and Enoch stood became darker and the cold settled into the shadows around them.

When Enoch pulled up outside Ma Dlamini's house, they sat in the car in silence for a moment.

He looked ahead into the dark street and then turned to Violet. He took her hand in his. "It was a good day?"

She nodded. But the tightness in her stomach had not eased on the journey home. She had felt relief once they had turned off the dirt road onto the main road, but when she had turned to look at Enoch she had seen anger in his face and the hard grip of his hands on the steering wheel. He drove faster than she liked.

Now sitting in the cold car, she wanted to get inside into the warm kitchen, where supper was cooking on the stove, and Ma Dlamini and the boys chatting. His grasp on her hand was too tight. “I better get in. Ma will be wondering where I am.”

But he didn’t let go of her hand. “My Ma was endorsed out of Johannesburg when I was fifteen. Just like that she was told to go. I had to find work. I left school. I didn’t know what loneliness was until then.”

Violet looked at him, trying to decipher his face in the dark. Her hand hurt as his grip tightened. She tried to pull her hand away and as she did he looked at her, coming back to the car and her and the dark street.

He smiled and relaxed his grip. “Well, that is why I can cook.”

She slipped her hand out of his. “Thanks, Enoch. It was a lovely day.”

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Davey had said Violet should have Thursday afternoons off. Mrs Tilly had taken that to mean three o’clock. Eliza, who worked in one of the flats above the shop and who Violet sometimes visited at lunch in the small room on the roof, got off at one o’clock. She waited for Violet, and together they walked down Hospital Street to meet Enoch, who gave them a lift into town. In Diagonal Street, Violet had put a dress and a pair of shoes on lay-by, and while she went into the shop to pay her next instalment, Enoch and Eliza went off to a nearby tearoom to wait for her.

Violet was longer than she expected; first it was the long queue at Starlite Fashion and then Beatrice coming out of Limbada Books as Violet walked past. She was surprised at Beatrice’s relief at seeing her. She held onto Violet’s hand to draw her aside from the steady stream of shoppers and wrapped her up in a lengthy conversation. Beatrice was rattled. She told Violet that some of the white women at work had complained about sharing the facilities with her. Violet was unsure of how to console her.

“I’m meeting Enoch and Eliza, come with me,” Violet said, not expecting Beatrice to agree. But she did.

The tearoom was busy, and it took a while for Violet to find Enoch and Eliza. Standing just inside the entrance, she scanned the tables and those who were at the counter still ordering meals. Then she saw them sitting at a table in a corner, leaning towards each other in close conversation and then laughing at a shared joke. It gave her a jolt as she saw how close they were. She saw that Beatrice had seen it too.

"Why don't we go home," Beatrice said to her. She smiled gently at Violet.

They left together, slipping out of the tearoom back onto the street, and they walked in silence through the throng of people to the buses near Faraday station.

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Fresh flowers were delivered every Tuesday. If the shop had been busy during the week, Violet reminded Mrs Tilly on Thursday afternoon to phone in an order to the Norwood store for a Friday morning delivery. But now that winter had set in fewer customers stopped for flowers as they hurried home in the icy late afternoons, the darkness coming earlier each day, and when Enoch did deliver flowers to the Hillbrow store, Violet saw him disappear into the building where Eliza worked.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Icy air nipped at Keturia's ankles as she sat on an overturned crate she used as a chair, a blanket wrapped around her. She looked at the crack in one small pane in the window set high on the south-facing wall of her room. At the centre of the crack was a small hole, as if someone had thrown a stone at it. She had moved her bed from the centre of the room, where the only thing she could see out of the window at night was the slab of the prison wall — the relentless bricks filling the window frightened her. Her bed was now against the wall, directly below the window. From there she had hoped to be able to look at the stars on the many nights she couldn't sleep. But there were lights now on top of the tall wall that surrounded the prison, and she could see no stars beyond their glare.

She hadn't noticed the lights being installed, so they must have been there all along and just not switched on. But since Tuesday, the lights, along intermittent sections of the wall, shone all night and every now and then she could hear footfalls up and down the lane outside her room as prison guards kept watch.

It was on the Monday evening that sharp whistles, frantic shouting and the hard thud of running feet had startled her while she was washing the dinner dishes. Mr Dickenson had come striding into the kitchen and peered out through the window. He was sure, he had said, that it was a prisoner who had escaped. Keturia had watched him as he spoke to himself in a nervous stream of words while checking that the back door was locked. He had told her to wait in the kitchen while he checked the front door. She stood at the kitchen sink wiping it over again, even though her feet were aching.

As she had looked up through the window above the sink into the dark yard, two frightened eyes looked back at her. She had held his gaze and wondered now why she did not look away in fright or even scream. But it comforted her now that she hadn't as she knew that the smooth forehead above his eyes meant he was a boy, maybe younger than Violet.

She had only seen his face for a moment, as the whine of the swing door that led from the passage into the kitchen had made her turn around. The girl was standing there, and by the time she looked back into the yard, the frightened eyes were gone.

Mr Dickenson had told Poppy to go to bed when they heard voices in the lane. White men. And then a sharp knock on the back door.

"Yes?" Mr Dickenson had said, his voice rising.

At a stream of Afrikaans, he opened the door and the men walked into the kitchen without an invitation. Keturia had watched Mr Dickenson struggle to follow what they were saying. She had easily understood the Afrikaans they spoke, but Mr Dickenson had not. They wanted to know what he had seen, had anyone come past the house. They never asked her, and neither of the guards had looked her way.

She wondered now if the frightened eyes she had seen through the window had got away. She pulled the blanket over her head, hoping he had.

Keturia climbed onto her bed and standing precariously on the rickety structure covered the window with newspaper and tape she had found in the pantry. She couldn't see out, but no one could see in either. She switched off the light and lay on her bed in the deep darkness for a long time.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Bark scratched the back of Poppy's thighs. She remained still, but her breathing was hard and rapid from the quick climb up the tree. Sitting astride a branch in the Belhambra she could see the front garden and a corner of the backyard where a pumpkin plant had launched itself over a low wooden fence and was making its way across the slasto paving to the washing line.

Bella's dog Scout was troubling at a patch in the flowerbed under the lounge window. There were still enough leaves to keep Poppy hidden from her mother and Keturia in the yard. Felicity spoke to Keturia, who looked at her and then turned to unpeg the washing from the line. Singular sounds blew towards Poppy, and then Felicity turned sharply towards the house. Keturia began to rehang the washing. Poppy watched her as she stretched the sheets taut on the back line, undergarments on the middle line, shirts, trousers, blouses, skirts and dresses on the front line.

Her mother had said last night she would take Bella to the dressmaker today for the dress she needed for the King Edward dance. Poppy was waiting in the tree until they went out. Three nurses were walking towards Joubert Street, their white caps bobbing above the shrubbery at the edge of the garden.

She saw the postman coming along Sam Hancock. She had made the mistake before of assuming he would cycle up the lane, when in fact he walked, pushing his bicycle up the hill before turning into the small road that led to their house, and so he had reached the postbox at the end of their driveway at the same time she did. He had stood so close to her, she could see the strands of sweat running down from his temple to his jaw, his face splotches of dark red and pink. The smell of him forced Poppy to breathe through her mouth. He handed her the letters and as she took them his fingers stroked the back of her hand. He grinned at her. Then he was on his bicycle heading back down the narrow road to Joubert Street Extension, leaving her in the driveway rubbing the back of her hand hard.

Now that she knew he pushed his bicycle up the hill, she gave him fifteen minutes from the time he turned into Empire. She added on another five minutes to be sure.

Poppy had her father's binoculars. She scanned the windows on the nurses' home and the few people who walked up the lane. It must be twenty minutes but she couldn't remember when she had started the countdown. Dropping from the lowest branch she landed in a crouch and dashed across the lawn before slowing to walk alongside the hydrangeas that had grown large under the shade of the pine trees in their garden. These three trees had escaped the tree fellers. They had shed a spongy carpet of needles, which Poppy's feet sank into. In the last few yards to the postbox she forgot that the ground gave way to a small hollow. She slipped, landing so hard that the air rushed out of her. Lying on the ground she examined her throbbing hip. She froze at a crunching sound on the gravel driveway. Through the leggy base of the hydrangeas she saw thick ankles, and the hem of a brown skirt. She kept still. The woman stopped. She stood still for what seemed ages and then turned and walked to the road and was gone. If Poppy had been in the tree she might have seen who it was.

As Poppy was about to get up she heard the creak of the bicycle. She remained lying down, listening for the shove of letters in the postbox and the receding click-click of the bicycle chain as the postman cycled away. She counted to 119 before collecting the post and then walked out the driveway gate, turning right along the narrow road in front of their house that ended at the lane. She looked up the lane and peered through the shrubbery into their garden. No one was in sight, so she turned right into the lane and walked quickly to the low garden gate. Tucking the envelopes into the waistband of her skirt, she climbed over it and then hauled herself up into the tree.

There were three letters for her father and a thick cream envelope with a rushed scrawl on the front. It was addressed to Mrs Dickenson. There was no stamp. She prised it open to find one page covered in tiny writing that was difficult to read in the dappled shade cast by the leaves above her shuffling in the breeze.

The front door slammed, Bella called from the veranda. "Poppy, you'd better come in."

Poppy quickly shoved the letter back in its envelope.

Bella marched across the lawn and stopped beneath the tree. "Poppy. Come down."

She looked down at the top of her sister's head, her parting perfectly straight. "I'm busy."

"Somebody's moved her perfumes. Was it you? She's looking in her drawers again."

Poppy didn't move.

"I am going to tennis."

"What about the dressmaker?"

"She's not feeling well."

Poppy watched Bella's long stride and pointed nose, like their mother's, leading her down to the tennis courts near the nurses' home, and as she walked down the driveway her long, thick auburn hair swung from side to side.

Poppy's plan had been to go to the library once her mother and Bella had left for the dress fitting. She would now have to take a chance. Once inside the house, she walked slowly up the passage past the closed door of her parents' bedroom. She fetched her books from her room and went back down the passage, barely breathing as she did so. The lounge door was ajar.

"Poppy, is that you? Poppy, come into the lounge. Poppy. Come in now," her mother said, her voice becoming more insistent when Poppy did not respond.

Poppy pushed the lounge door wide open. With only one curtain open it was dim inside. Her mother was sitting in her father's chair, a glass in her hand. She looked across the room at Poppy, who remained standing in the doorway.

"I said, come in."

Poppy watched her mother take a sip of her drink and then slowly lower the glass to the side table, her hand shaking. She rested her head against the high back of the chair, as an ugly sobbing sound came out of her.

Poppy stepped out of the room, quickly reached for the door handle and closed the door quietly. She went to her parents' bedroom to look for coins. The drawers in her mother's dressing table were pulled open, a few items lay scattered on the floor. Miniature perfume bottles were clustered beneath the right-hand mirror. One, a small glass bottle half the size of Poppy's hand, had grooves in the glass that ran down the length of the bottle. It had a tiny cut-glass stopper and was half-filled with green liquid. Poppy unscrewed another bottle with a gold-coloured cap and sniffed. She put that tiny perfume bottle into the pocket of her skirt, and then scratched around in her mother's handbag for loose change. She would get an ice cream after the library.

No one noticed Poppy in a corner of the library. She sat deep in the leather armchair, her feet a few inches off the floor and a book on her lap, watching who arrived. Two women were whispering near the romance shelf while casting glances at the librarian. Some Saturdays the librarian's hair was straight and then she would perpetually run her hand over it, but today it

was a mass of loose curls that bobbed as she worked. But it was the lemon-yellow dress she was wearing that the women were whispering about. Poppy looked at her own clothes; her skirt was too short and a section of the hem was unravelling. She made sure the book covered it.

It was the picture books she came for. Her mother had tossed them out when they left the farm. She liked this little rabbit's sweet face and the cosy homes inside tree trunks. The clock on the far wall was ticking towards noon. Poppy slotted the book about the rabbit that could fly back onto a dusty bottom shelf crammed with books on road maintenance. *Pookie* was last issued in January 1961.

Poppy was the last in the line at the counter. As the queue shuffled forward Poppy watched the librarian and her clickety-click stamp as it imprinted the return date on the slip at the back of book after book. She had six books, thick enough to last the two weeks she could keep them.

"The limit is four books for children," the librarian said. She looked over Poppy's choices. "Oh, I loved this book." She flicked through *A Girl of the Limberlost.* "There's another book by the same author, that comes before this one. *Freckles,* you should read that one first."

"I have."

The librarian slowly tapped her finger on the second book and then turned it over to look at the back cover. "This one isn't from the children's section."

Poppy waited.

"It might scare you."

"How scary is it?"

"Well, it's a story, made up, so remember that. Tell me how scary when you return it."

The librarian fiddled with the stamp, "I'll give you two extra weeks since you are taking more books, but bring them back earlier if you're finished."

"I'm Poppy." But as soon as she spoke she wished she hadn't and she quickly shoved her books into her bag.

"I'm Birdie."

Poppy looked up to see a smile shine from Birdie's eyes.

A block from the library Poppy remembered her plan to get an ice cream, but a cold wind had come up and with the heavy bag of books she didn't want to walk back to the corner cafe. She stopped outside the flower shop.

A woman was carrying buckets of flowers from the pavement into the shop. "Do you want to buy? We are closing soon."

Poppy looked at her, unsure if she was being spoken to.

"I will wait while you choose."

Poppy stepped closer to a bucket full of sunflowers, surprised at the big bright flowers on such a cold April day.

"No, I am just looking."

"The price is lower now. We are closed tomorrow. On Monday we order new flowers."

"I just want one."

"Let me check with Mrs Tilly. Come in."

Violet indicated that Poppy should speak to the woman sitting at the counter. She was working on a crossword puzzle. She looked up at Poppy through the glasses perched on the end of her nose. "What is it?"

"Can I buy a sunflower?"

"Violet, make up a bouquet."

"One. Just one sunflower."

She sighed and slid the watch-strap on her wrist around to check the time. "Violet, can't you deal with some of these customers? I can't do everything."

Violet held Poppy's books while she chose the flower, pressing the stems to find the firmest one. Poppy would give it to her mother, and when it had faded she could keep the seeds to plant in the garden next summer.

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Poppy peeped into the lounge. With the icy air in the passage at her back the room was warm.

Her father was in his chair, which he had pulled closer to the fire, fiddling with something he held under the lamp on the side-table next to his chair. "Ah, Pops, there you are. Come in, close the door, you're letting in the cold."

She sat on the floor near him. "What are you doing?"

“Trying to fix this.” He showed her the small wooden box.

“That’s mine.”

“I know, I am trying to get it to work again.”

The lid of the box had insects painted on the outside and on the underside was a tangle of leaves and vines, with a few deeply coloured flowers nestled among the foliage. A mechanism, if wound tight, used to set off a small fairy turning in a circle when the box was opened. Her father had given it to her the year before for her eighth birthday. But when she had unpacked in their new home, the fairy no longer turned. It was only then, when her mother said Poppy should throw it away, that her father told her he had made the box. She asked where he had found the fairy, but he wouldn’t tell her, saying fairies did not like to be talked about.

Harold stopped working on the box as the wind picked up outside, rushing through the Belhambra tree and rattling the window.

“Read to me, Pops,” Harold said, indicating the newspapers loosely folded on the floor next to his chair.

Poppy picked up the papers. “Premier speaks to the world”, was the biggest headline on the front page. “New Republic stays friend of the West,” the article continued.

She read the first two paragraphs, her father snorting when it said: “The Ministers swore ‘to be faithful’ to Republic of South Africa.”

And when she read the bit about South Africa being friendly, prosperous and progressive, he told her he didn’t want to hear any more. She had stumbled over the last words, and thought it was her stilted reading that had bored him.

They lapsed into silence, Poppy making a note as she read other stories on the page to look up the word assassinated.

Then her father said: “Anything more interesting?”

Poppy read out the headlines, but he shook his head at each one.

On page 3 Poppy closely examined the photo spread. “50 000 jam Church Square”, the headline said. “Look, Dad.” She showed him the thousands standing in the square and another photo of hundreds more crammed on the balconies of a building.

“Lemmings.”

She didn’t know what he meant.

She turned to the classifieds, reading out the surnames of the listings under births, engagements and deaths, reading the notice in full if her father nodded at the name. She wasn’t sure if he knew any of these people. There were job ads, some of which Poppy noticed

her father had circled in pen, and a section for farm sales. She read those to herself, wondering if her father had seen the adverts or if she should tell him about them. But for months now, he had not mentioned buying another farm, so she kept them to herself.

Poppy always read the swop column last, choosing the best ones to read to her father. Someone wanted to swop an aeroplane for a plot of ground. Or a house for a car. Another wanted to give away land north of Johannesburg in exchange for a seaside cottage. Poppy asked her father why they had not done that with the farm, instead of moving to Johannesburg. He smiled at her.

"We could still do it, Dad, swop this house and find somewhere else to live."

"I don't own this house, Pops."

"Then why do we live here?"

"The rent is cheap. A perk of my job, I suppose you could say?"

But he didn't sound happy and Poppy was not sure he was even talking to her.

There was a Jersey bull on offer in exchange for a riding pony. Poppy skipped that one, not wanting to upset her father.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Dickensons attended church on Sunday morning, unless Felicity was unwell, then they missed it altogether or Harold took the girls to church by himself. One Sunday, when Felicity had refused to get out of bed, after the service he stood in the sun on the lawn outside the church, fiddling with his collar that looked too tight, fielding questions from some of the wives about Felicity's wellbeing. He didn't say a word on the way home, striding ahead of Poppy and Bella, and spent the rest of the day in the lounge with the radio on and the newspaper. But since then, for too many Sundays now, Felicity had got up early to get ready for church.

Poppy lay in bed, a cold wind whipping around outside. She listened for the sounds of her parents getting up or the quiet footsteps of her father walking down the passage, a sign that her mother needed to stay in bed. Poppy wanted to remain under the warm blankets and read, with a cup of tea and a plate of rusks to dip into it. She didn't want to have stand still in the bathroom while her mother brushed her hair hard and tied it back into a tight pony-tail, or sit through the service wearing her too-tight black patent leather shoes.

An hour later Poppy and Bella were waiting in the garden while their parents argued. Harold liked to walk to St George's. Felicity didn't. Poppy was relieved when her father, after looking at his watch, took the car keys out of his pocket and opened the garage door.

As they walked into church, a few steps behind their parents, Bella bent to Poppy and said: "If he had his car keys in his pocket, then he knew he wasn't going to win the argument. Well, I guess he never does."

Later that week, Poppy found her mother in the kitchen, wearing her house dress, the one she had worn so often at the farm. The fabric was covered in tiny dark green sprigs and there

were buttons all the way down the front. Her hair was tied back with a scarf and she had a smudge of flour on her chin.

"Oh Pops, you're up. I was just coming to wake you. Bella's gone off to school already. You better hurry. Take breakfast in the dining room. Ketty will bring it through," her mother said.

"What are you making?"

"Your favourite. Marmite tart. Some of the ladies from St George's are coming for tea. I will try keep you a slice."

A banana loaf was cooling on a rack on the kitchen counter. Poppy peeked under a tea towel covering a pile of scones.

"Take one of those to school. I'll butter it while you have breakfast."

Before Poppy left for school, she stopped at the back door and looked back at her mother working in the kitchen. Her face was slightly flushed. Poppy thought she looked so pretty.

Once home from school, Poppy was told by her mother to stay out of the way when the ladies from the church arrived for tea. She had changed from her house dress into a pale green skirt with a matching jacket and a cream blouse with mother of pearl buttons. Poppy noticed the lipstick her mother had applied had smudged slightly, a sheen of sweat glistened above her upper lip and there was a flush to her cheeks. As she ate her lunch at the kitchen table, Poppy looked at Keturia, who had also noticed her mother's shaking hands. They both watched Felicity carefully.

After the ladies arrived and settled into the living room, Poppy crept up the passage and stopped to listen outside the living room door. She couldn't even hear a murmur of conversation. She hoped they weren't eating all the cake. Keturia, who was waiting in the kitchen to be called by Felicity if the teapot needed to be refilled or extra jam and cream brought through, looked at Poppy sharply when she came back into the kitchen from inside the house. Poppy was told to go outside and stay there until the tea party was over.

She walked up the lane to Kotze Street and stopped on the other side of the road opposite the entrance to The Fort, which was set into a tunnel in the hillside. The tall wooden doors, studded in places and fortified with iron bars and locks, were the entrance to the giant's castle, the men positioned on top of the hill in small little huts on each corner — his gnomes recruited to protect the place. The road a moat.

He was a bad giant today, but sometimes at night when Poppy lay in bed and heard singing from the other side of the prison wall, she thought he was a sad giant. Once past the

prison governor's house, she headed down the hill. Slipping through the hedge that bordered the bowling greens, she made her way around them and then across the rugby field back home. The cars that had been parked one behind the other in their driveway were no longer there.

Poppy looked into the lounge. The sideboard was still set with most of the scones, a banana loaf with one slice cut and the tart that remained whole. Poppy wondered why adults would come to a tea party and not eat cake. There was a plate with a half-eaten scone and a teacup with tea leaves lying in the bottom.

Poppy was startled when she realised her mother was sitting very still on the sofa. Standing near the sideboard, Poppy froze, unsure how to leave the room.

Her mother raised a glass to her lips, and when she had drained it, filled it again from a small flask she took from behind a cushion. "Help yourself. No one else is going to eat."

Unable to see her mother's face in the fading light, she hesitated.

"It's fine, have some," her mother said, as she raised the glass again to her lips.

Poppy cut a slice of Marmite tart and a piece of cake and retreated to the kitchen to share with Keturia.

No one could tell Poppy when winter started. Spring was the first of September, but the start of autumn and then winter had no fixed beginning.

Felicity was baking for the church's cake sale. "Why do you need to know, Poppy?"

"It doesn't make sense to have a first day for spring and not for the other seasons."

"OK. Let's say May, the first of May."

"So then its winter now?'

"Yes."

Poppy used her fingers to count. "So then there are only four months of winter?"

Felicity, checking the recipe again, didn't answer.

"Then why am I still sleeping in summer pajamas?"

"Oh God, Poppy, I don't know. Keturia, watch the chocolate cake. Take it out in 20 minutes. I need to lie down."

The chocolate cake they took to the St George's Church cake sale did not sell. Felicity, Bella and Poppy left with it. Bella insisted they take it home after she had watched woman after woman check the label on it and move on. One woman with a large nose and too much lipstick had asked loudly who Felicity Dickenson was. She was shushed by her friend and when they walked off the three of them watched the two women, heads bent together,

whispering, Lipstick Face turning back to look at them. Their mother said nothing as other women exclaimed over Shirley's lemon meringue pie or Judith's scones.

They walked home in silence. After they crossed Empire Road and were past the Queen Vic, Bella stopped: "We live on the wrong hill."

They turned to look back at the houses on the opposite hill, some with four or five chimneys showing above the tree tops. Then they carried on to their house halfway up the hill. Behind it the prison's red-brick wall rose to the blue sky.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Hound of the Baskervilles had kept Poppy up late for two nights. She lay in bed waiting for her parents to go to sleep. Peeping into the passage, she checked if there was a line of light under their closed bedroom door before switching on her bedside lamp to read. But on the third night of reading the book, a long, low, moaning sound in the backyard outside her window made her dash under the blankets. She stretched out her hand from under the covers to find the switch to turn off the lamp and lay huddled under the covers, the sound of her heart beating hard drumming in her ears.

She decided to read that book during the day. And the best position to read in the Belhambra tree was a wide branch halfway up. She had a few pages to go and leaning against the trunk Poppy could read without being seen from below. Now, with the book finished and sitting on a lower branch, she watched her mother walk across the lawn to her chair. Felicity carried the green and white striped cushion from the house, her crocheted book bag and a glass. She sat on a fan-shaped wire chair next to its matching table smoking, staring ahead. What was she looking at and for so long? With only one chair — the other removed to the backyard — no one was ever invited to join her. Felicity flicked a cigarette end into the shrubs. Something silver she had taken out of her bag flashed in the sun. She filled her glass from it and buried it beneath the books in her bag.

In the yard Keturia was unpegging items from the line. Her movements were measured, never faster or slower, like she was passing time as she worked on the steady stream of laundry, going back and forth from inside the house to outside and then back in again.

Up on the high wall on the other side of the lane the bricks of the prison were a glorious red in the sun. A line of pigeons flocked and then settled on the top, fluttered up again and landed once again to strut up and down, jostling each other. Poppy counted 40 today. And then in, one almost synchronised movement the birds dropped down to the unseen side.

A breeze came up suddenly, sending leaves in slow swirls down to the lawn where the grass was too long in patches. Poppy rubbed her arms, her skin rose in small bumps. She troubled the small ridge of skin on her upper arm where her mother's fingernail had cut through her skin. It no longer hurt. Her mother had held on so tight to the skin that she pinched between her finger and thumb, not even letting go when Poppy's legs crumpled underneath her. When she did walk away, Poppy lay on the cool kitchen floor holding the hard lump in her throat, listening to the tap of her mother's shoes all the way up the passage. Keturia gave Poppy ice to hold against her arm, patted her back and then too walked from the kitchen. The mark was fading. The thin ridge only Poppy could see and only when she stood in front of the mirror and twisted the flesh on her upper arm around, and even then only in a certain light.

Poppy pulled the envelope with Felicity's name on it from the pocket of her trousers. She tried again to read the writing. A mynah bird cawed and when Poppy looked up to find the bird she saw her mother start from her reverie, sitting up straight and watching a black Ford creep up the driveway, behind her father's car. She stood quickly and walked fast towards the house, her hand over her mouth. Poppy edged forward along the branch but scrambled back to the trunk when it dipped under her weight.

No one got out of the cars until her mother come out of the front door wearing a cardigan and with lipstick on. She stood on the front porch with her arms crossed. Two men got out of the second car but stood shifting about, the tall one pulling his trousers up over a ballooning gut. Then they followed her father as he started walking towards the house. Poppy saw the GG on the number plate.

When the front door closed, Poppy scrambled down the tree and headed to the house.

"Come here," Keturia called her, surprising Poppy, who had not seen her in the garden. Keturia was sitting on a bench behind a hibiscus planted in a circle cut into the lawn. They sat there on the wooden slatted bench as the evening cooled, Keturia twisting a handkerchief in her hands until they heard car doors slam shut and the crunch of loose gravel as a car slid down the driveway. The late caw of a mynah bird made them start and clutch each other's hands. Then they laughed but didn't loosen their grasp.

"Poppy, Keturia?" Mr Dickenson called out.

He met them in the garden as they walked up in the shadows. Mr Dickenson waited in the courtyard with Poppy while Keturia opened the door to her room. Even after the hard click of her lock, he still asked through the door: "Is it locked properly, Keturia?"

He made Poppy a sandwich and tea for supper, but with him sitting opposite her it was hard for Poppy to eat. If he had wanted to say something he never did, eventually leaving her to finish on her own. Her parents' bedroom door was closed and there was no sliver of light beneath it.

Bella was lying in her bed reading. She didn't move the book she was holding in front of her face when Poppy looked in. "Selma's in jail."

"What rubbish."

Bella said nothing.

When Poppy returned to the kitchen to wash her plate and teacup she saw her mother standing at the open back door looking across the yard into the lane at the prison wall beyond. She stepped back quietly and once in her bedroom sat on her bed in the dark looking through the window at what little she could see in the blackness of the backyard, wondering if her aunt was also listening to the receding sounds of the night, the grind of a car straining up the hill and a door being closed hard as their neighbour locked up for the night.

Winter had been mild, but the sudden cold spell of the past few days meant they had had to find warm clothes for church on Sunday. Poppy saw Bella frown at her while they stood singing *Amazing Grace*.

Poppy, one of the last to leave the church after the service, found her sister and father standing together at the edge of the lawn waiting for her.

"Are you cross with me Bella?" Poppy asked her sister.

"No, Pops, why do you say that?"

"You looked cross in church."

"You were shivering. That cardigan is far too small for you. You're wearing a summer dress."

Poppy looked at the sleeves that reached halfway down her forearm. The cardigan could not be buttoned up properly.

"I couldn't find anything else."

"I know."

Poppy looked up at her sister. She still seemed cross.

Poppy's thin light brown hair had slipped out of the pony-tail Bella had tied before church to hide the bulge of the knot she had been unable to untangle, while their father, impatient for them to go, stood in the entrance hall tapping his foot on the floor. Poppy looked up at Bella and smiled.

Bella smiled back. “You need a haircut, Pops. I will take you next weekend.”

Poppy saw a young man with thick sandy-coloured hair looking at Bella, but when Bella looked at him he quickly turned away. Their father wandered off to chat to other men who were standing in a small alcove recessed off one veranda outside the church and while Poppy and her sister waited for him, the young man walked over to them. He introduced himself as Bob and slipped into easy conversation. He did most of the talking. An older woman called to him and when she walked over she gave Bella a stiff smile, before indicating to her son, who she called Robert, that they should leave.

Three women came over to them, encircled Bella and Poppy and asked after their mother and whether she was getting the rest she needed.

On the walk home, Harold slowed his pace to walk in step with Bella. “I see you were talking to McDonald’s son.”

“Who?”

“That young man you were speaking to. He’s Tish McDonald’s eldest. Only son, three sisters, I think. He’ll take over McDonald’s business one day.”

Even with the sun high in the sky it was too cold to be outside. Poppy lay on her father’s bed under a crocheted blanket reading, a patch of sun almost warming her feet. Bella was calling her. She didn’t respond, but she stopped reading to listen to her sister’s progress through the house, stomping into the kitchen and then back up the passage, where she asked Keturia where Poppy was.

“The tree?” Keturia said.

Bella’s mounting exasperation, matched by her rising voice, had not woken their mother, who was asleep in the single bed next to her father’s.

Poppy watched Bella outside the window of her parents’ room standing under the Belhambra looking up into the canopy, dust and detritus blowing around her and sticking in her hair. As she stormed back into the house, Poppy heard her say: “God, where is that child?”

She curled up under the blanket, and carried on reading, waiting for Bella to find her.

Bella instructed her to come to her room, and there lying on Bella’s bed, she carried on reading while her sister and Keturia took down the two suitcases on top of the wardrobe filled with winter clothes. With the suitcases open on her bed, Bella inspected each item and set aside two jackets and a coat that needed to be dry-cleaned. She hung up skirts in her

wardrobe and examined her stockings for runs. Poppy protested when she opened her bedroom window, despite the gusty wind outside, to air the room from the smell of mothballs. Bella made her try on clothes, most were still too big for her, except for a skirt that could be taken in and up. Bella draped it over the back of a chair, then packed her summer clothes, and the winter clothes she had out outgrown, but which would one day fit Poppy, back into the suitcases.

Their mother did not join them for supper and their father barely spoke.

When they finished their soup Bella brought through the fish. “Dad, Poppy needs winter clothes.”

Poppy watched her father pushing peas to the side of his plate, one at a time.

“Dad? Can I take Poppy tomorrow morning? She needs new shoes, stockings and a winter skirt.”

He stopped what he was doing and looked up at Bella.

“Dad, are you listening? I need to get Poppy clothes.”

“What about all the clothes in her wardrobe?”

“She’s outgrown most of her winter clothes.”

“Well, your mother could knit her some cardigans, make up some skirts.”

Bella snorted.

Harold looked at her sharply and she looked down at her plate.

They finished their meal in silence, but while Poppy was clearing the table, Harold asked Bella if nothing of hers fitted Poppy.

“Dad, I am eight years older than Poppy.”

“Yes, I see.” Harold rose from the table and called from the passage as he walked to the living room for a cup of tea.

Poppy could see the irritation in her sister’s face, but when she noticed Poppy looking at her, Bella smiled. “Don’t worry, Pops, I’ll sort it out with Dad. We’ll go shopping tomorrow.”

They walked into town, and even with the chill in the air Poppy was hot by the time they reached John Orr’s. Poppy was first taken for a haircut, which Bella insisted be trimmed shorter than Poppy wanted. Then they wandered through the store, which had several floors. It was Poppy’s first visit, but Bella knew her way around. Poppy wanted a bright red coat, but her sister said no once she looked at the price tag. She chose an olive-green dress

and a pleated red-striped tartan skirt. Bella agreed to a red cardigan Poppy insisted on trying on, adding it to the flannel nightdress, two pairs of trousers, and stockings in their basket. It was choosing the shoes that took the longest. Bella wanted Poppy to have two pairs — she insisted on a pair of black patent leather shoes for church and a second pair so she stopped running around barefoot looking like a poor white. Poppy wanted the red rubber boots. Bella said no, they didn't live on a farm anymore, she needed lace ups. They sat next to each other on the small ottoman provided for customers trying on shoes, speaking in fierce whispers. But after Bella examined the price tags on each item in their basket, she conceded to the red rubber boots, which were far cheaper than the lace-ups.

As they stood in line at the till, Poppy asked: "Are you not getting anything, Bella?"

"Not today, I have clothes from last winter. I'll get new dresses made in spring. Let's have tea."

The tearoom was vast, with more tables than Poppy could count. Once they were seated, a waiter trundling a tea trolley laden with cakes stopped at their table. Poppy chose a slice of chocolate cake and sweetened her tea with small cubes of sugar. Bella said she wasn't hungry, and waved the waiter away. It was only after Poppy finished her cake that she realised how quiet Bella was, a small frown furrowing her brow. Poppy followed her gaze to a group of women who had arrived at the tearoom. They carried bags and bags of shopping; several waiters attended to them, taking their parcels away to be stored while they took tea. They made their way to a table near Poppy and Bella. It was a group of mothers and teenage daughters. Two girls came over and greeted Bella. Poppy watched one repeatedly stroke her hair, the other looked around the room as she spoke to Bella. They asked her sister whether she was coming to the dance the following weekend, but they didn't wait for her reply. They spoke to each other of their plans for that afternoon, attending a rugby match at King Edward. They said Bella should come, they would go to the Doll House afterwards for ice cream. Bella smiled and said maybe.

When Poppy and Bella rose to leave, Poppy saw the women's table was laden with cakes and sandwiches that they had barely touched. On the bus ride home Poppy watched Bella sit with her hands in her lap, staring out the window. She said nothing as they walked the last stretch home and spent the rest of the day in her bedroom with the door closed.

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In the afternoons and early evenings the phone rang a lot. It was always for Bella, and Poppy refused to answer it. But Bella would stand next to it leaving it to ring, eventually compelling Poppy to rush into the entrance hall to answer. Bob telephoned often. Bella sat on the small chair next to the telephone and they talked for ages. If the front door was open, Poppy, sitting in a chair on the veranda, could see Bella. She usually seemed bored by the lengthy conversations, which was mostly Bob talking and Bella nodding and making sounds of agreement.

One Saturday Bella was invited to Bob's house in Houghton for an afternoon bop. That morning Poppy and Keturia had heard Bella's raised voice as she demanded that Aaron, who worked in the garden on Saturday mornings, wash the car. Poppy, who was in the kitchen, saw Keturia raise her eyebrows at the disagreement. Aaron said he would miss his train. Bella said he wouldn't if he stopped arguing and just cleaned the car. He did it and left without saying goodbye. Bella chose anyway in the end to get a lift with Sheila, whose father drove an American car. She seemed happier when she returned home that evening, sitting on the end of her mother's bed telling her parents, who were reading, of the large house and garden that Bob's parents owned. Poppy, sitting on the floor in the passage, could hear her mother's interest in Bob's family.

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Poppy wanted to play netball. She had practised the last week of the holidays with the hoop her father had put up in the garden. She had to wait for their neighbour, Mrs Smit, to leave for her daily shopping excursion because she had complained to Poppy and then Bella and Mr Dickenson that the thud of the ball gave her a headache. Poppy waited in the tree until she saw her with her handbag and shopping basket walking down the driveway the two houses shared. From the Belhambra Poppy could see when she had reached Joubert Street. Sometimes she was picked up by a younger blonde woman who wore very red lipstick; one time when she got out of the car she had on a short dress. Bella, who was in the garden with Poppy, had looked impressed as she watched the young woman walk to Mrs Smit's house to ring the bell. On those occasions when the young woman fetched her, Mrs Smit didn't have her basket and wore smarter clothes, but Bella still called her Mrs Trunk, with her flat shoes, thick legs and no waist.

At school, Poppy stood in a line on the edge of the netball court waiting for her turn to try out for the team. Each girl had three shots at the hoop. Jane, Lily and Jessica all scored.

The girls who did not were greeted with sniggers. Poppy's first shot went in. As she walked back to stand in position to take her second shot, she looked at the girls lined up watching her, some with their arms folded and hard faces, others whispering and giggling as they looked at her. She dropped the ball, letting it roll away, and fetched her school bag at the edge of the court, ignoring the teacher who called after her as she walked away.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The trees on the opposite ridge had shed their leaves and it was no longer just the shingled roofs and chimney pots atop the large houses on the ridge opposite Hospital Hill that Felicity could see from their garden. On clear days the west sun blazed against the stone blocks of one house which, now that it had emerged from the bare trees on the wooded hill, Felicity noticed was entirely built of stone. It was the one house that she kept returning to as she sat in the garden in the late summer months since their arrival, wondering who slept in the rooms behind the small windows in the roof, and why, on some blazing hot days, a faint smudge of smoke rose against the pale blue sky from one of the chimneys.

Now through the bare trees, she could see that the many windows on the second storey were opened every morning by the time she came out into the front garden. At four o'clock they were shut. She checked her watch each time she noticed the windows being closed, as someone inside moved from room to room, always starting at one end of the second storey and working her way to the other end.

At midday it was often mild, even warm sometimes when the sun was overhead. But today it felt like winter, and was chilly when she came out to sit in the garden soon after lunch. She had brought a tall glass with gin topped up with tonic, a cushion for the chair and her loose cloth bag with a book and sketch pad and pencils. She read as she sipped the drink, but the book failed to keep her attention for long.

She surveyed the garden. The grass was still green patches, even though it hadn't rained for weeks. The daisy bushes and geraniums were encouraged by the cooler weather, and had added on bright green growth and blooms.

It was a good day. Felicity returned inside to top up her drink, and back in her chair in the garden she stretched her legs out and, despite the chill, kicked off her shoes, nestling her toes in the grass that was just getting on the long side again. Harold would be late, staying for a meeting. Or was it a game of tennis and a drink at the club after? She couldn't recall. If he expected supper when he returned he hadn't told her and she had told Keturia to give the girls dinner in the kitchen. The garden was hers today, uninterrupted by Harold arriving home at

five o'clock and the ceremony of supper — the soup followed by the main followed by fruit, with each course accompanied by the same conversation they had had the evening before, and the evening before, with only an occasional variation. Felicity preferred silence at the dinner table. The meal had become so tiresome she would rather not eat dinner at all.

She checked her watch. It was a few minutes before four o'clock. She looked at the stone house, waited for the progress of the windows being closed. The banality of that routine of opening a window to close it, like making a bed to unmake it, comforted her, knowing that in other homes, even far grander ones than hers, there were other women doing the same things over and over again, with nothing to show for what they had accomplished. Is maintaining the steady rhythms of a house accomplished or an accomplishment?

She wandered inside, walking barefoot through the grass to fetch the bottles of gin and tonic, which she took into the garden to save herself another trip inside. She had forgotten the tot measure, and not bothering to get it, splashed the gin into her glass and filled it up with tonic. She sat back down, and then moved the gin bottle onto the grass beneath the table and rested her book bag against it so it was not visible from any window in their house or the neighbours.

Felicity had sketched that rooftop of the stone house and the few houses nearby. But as she flipped through her sketch book she knew it wasn't an accurate reflection of what she could see from their garden. The series of drawings were only a wedge of the Parktown ridge, she had left out the other buildings that cluttered her view. The Children's Hospital and the back of the nurses' home and the Queen Vic.

She had planned to use the drawings for a painting, but she had yet to start on any. Over the last sketch she now drew two diagonal lines, crossing in the middle. She turned to a blank page and fished pencils out of her bag. She looked at the dark blank rectangular windows of the stone house as the west sun washed it in a golden glow. She left the book with its blank page open on the table and reached down for the bottle of gin.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Violet was ready to leave for work but stood at Ma Dlamini's front door looking out into the dark. She could only see as far as the few steps that would take her to the front fence. The hard rain sounded like a rush of wind. She had left her umbrella at the shop, not bothering to bring it home, as she had not expected rain until summer. She stepped back inside to ask Ma Dlamini if she had a spare one, but once she had closed the front door Violet could hear her berating her sons in a steady stream of words that was heading for a crescendo. She tucked her bag under her coat and felt for the pass in the inside pocket and stepped into the darkness.

Beatrice had not been home for two nights. No one had said anything, besides Lwazi, who had been told to be quiet. But Violet knew Ma Dlamini was worried, as the crease above the bridge of her nose had deepened. Once on the road Violet could see people walking, their heads hidden under umbrellas or bent beneath folded newspapers held above their heads. She fell in with them. Mud sucked at one of her shoes and her foot slipped out, leaving not only the shoe encrusted in dirt but her foot as well. Rushing now, she had to put her shoe back on with her right foot covered in mud.

She crossed over a rocky expanse of ground, with a series of narrow paths worn into it. It was a short cut to the bus terminus, but she regretted taking it as the loose gravel on the path was slippery in the rain and she lost her footing several times, to the irritation of those walking behind her.

As she reached the road, she heard her name. "Violet," someone called. It was an unfamiliar voice and, uncertain she had heard correctly, she carried on until a man, breathing hard, reached her and put his hand on her shoulder to make her stop.

It was Musa. "Here, share my umbrella," he said.

She was already sodden and with the terminus a block away and the rain easing, his umbrella would make no difference, but Violet was unsure how to say no.

He fell in step with her. "Where are you working?" he said.

"Town."

"Where?"

"Kotze."

Violet regretted giving him this information as soon as she spoke. She thought of Beatrice, who gave the impression of answering a question, but when you reflected later on her answers, you realised she had said almost nothing. Just given you words put together in her gravelly voice that made you feel she was confiding in you.

"Where is Beatrice?" Musa asked.

This startled her. Had she spoken aloud, mentioned Beatrice's name? She joined the line of people waiting for buses. She was wet and dizzy. She had not yet eaten, preferring to take the scone spread thick with jam for a meal at work.

"I haven't seen her for a while," Musa said.

He looked at Violet as if he knew something. Then she remembered Beatrice's warning that his swagger and the knowing smile that made you feel as if you and he had a special something was a trick. It was now she saw just how true Beatrice's words were.

"She's around," Violet said.

"Around where? I haven't her seen at the house."

She said nothing more as she pushed to get on the bus, concentrating on holding her bag tightly beneath her coat. Relieved to have made it, she turned to look through the window, where Musa stood, his hard eyes staring back at her.

Mrs Tilly had already opened up by the time Violet arrived. The kettle was on and the bright orange bars of the heater added to the brightness of the store. Violet hung her wet coat on the hanger behind the back door and washed her muddy shoes and rinsed her feet at the tap in the alley behind the store. She left her shoes in a corner in the kitchen, hoping they would be dry by the end of the day and were not ruined. She was grateful she had taken Beatrice's advice to keep another pair of shoes at the shop for work.

As Violet drank her tea and ate the scone, her shaking hands steadied. From the stool in the kitchen she looked through the shop to the wet street, grim against the brightness and quiet of the store. The phone rang. Violet counted to seven. Mrs Tilly picked up on the eighth ring. Once, Mrs Tilly had sharply chided Mrs De Wet, who was a frequent visitor to the shop, for picking up the phone too early, saying that customers will think we have nothing better to do than sit at the phone waiting for it to ring. It caused a breach for a few days between the two women, with Mrs De Wet making a point of walking past the shop but not coming in. But it did not take her long to return to the shop for the tea and biscuits.

Violet began to move the buckets of flowers outside where they would be protected from the rain by an overhang that covered the pavement. She thought the flowers would spoil if they were left in the shop, which was almost too warm now with the heater still on. But Mrs Tilly said until the rain stopped the flowers should stay inside. Violet didn't disagree with her.

Mrs Tilly waved her hand around indicating Violet should dust and sweep. She knew to first remove any wilted stems before customers arrived and refresh the water in the buckets, which quickly turned foul-smelling if left too long. Few people came in on Monday morning and once the shop was clean, Violet sat in the kitchen, or, if orders had been phoned through, she arranged bouquets in the narrow alcove between the shop counter where Mrs Tilly spent her days and the small kitchen hidden behind a curtain.

Mrs De Wet, who lived in a flat above the shop, came in as usual after ten. At the sound of the doorbell, Violet waited and once she heard the nasal voice, she switched the kettle on and set the tea tray.

"Violet," Mrs Tilly called to her, "Go to OK for some biscuits. Yetta doesn't like Marie biscuits."

Violet waited for the money.

Mrs Tilly scrabbled in the till with her bony fingers, her knuckles swollen, for the exact change. "What do you fancy?"

"Tennis biscuits," Mrs De Wet said.

Mrs Tilly handed Violet the money. "Bring the change and the till slip. And don't dawdle."

Violet could not at first find the tennis biscuits, until a shelf packer showed her, and then she had to wait in a queue, held up by a customer who was debating her purchases as the teller tried to ring them up.

When she returned to the shop, the two women were impatiently waiting for their tea.

Mrs Tilly gave her a disapproving look. "You certainly took your time, Violet." She checked the slip and counted out the change.

Violet set six tennis biscuits on a plate. She had forgotten the tea towel Mrs Tilly insisted on when she laid the tray, so she had to re-lay the cups and saucers. She placed the sugar bowl over a stain she had been unable to remove.

As she came through from the kitchen, Violet saw that Mrs De Wet was deep into telling Mrs Tilly a story of a woman from her church who had a problem, the nature of which was indicated by a roll of her eyes and gesture of her hands, who let her two daughters run

wild, and how it was a shame as the older child was very pretty and what husband would she now attract with a mother like that. She didn't pause as Violet brought in the tea, neither did she move back from the counter she was leaning on to allow Violet to put it down. Violet slid the tray across the counter positioning the teapot under Mrs De Wet's face, who didn't notice until the steam rising from the spout made her lurch back. Violet turned back to the kitchen working hard not to smile.

The story was retold but in the second telling Mrs De Wet sympathised with the husband. She had to pause when the shop's phone rang. Both women sat watching the instrument as it rang seven times before Mrs Tilly answered. After dealing with the customer on the other end of the phone, Mrs Tilly returned to the story. She did not agree about the husband, it was clear he was too soft. Neither women, Violet had noticed, liked their stories to be challenged, especially if they had prepared well for the telling of them. The silence was interrupted by the slurping of tea. Violet waited; one would have to concede.

"I think I know the family. The older girl is very striking, with long auburn hair. It's a pity about the younger girl. Very plain. She came in here once with her mother. Poppy, I think it is, the younger girl," Mrs Tilly said.

"Oh, you've met the mother?"

"Yes, well not exactly met her. She was at my granddaughter's school concert. With her husband and older daughter. I saw some of the men looking at her. I don't know why, she's not pretty. She didn't smile once, not even when her younger daughter was on stage. She's too tall."

As Violet walked back into the front of the shop she saw Mrs De Wet nodding in agreement.

Violet usually walked to the park at lunchtime, but today she didn't have the energy. She sat in the back alley on a brick ledge that jutted out from the wall. The brickwork above the ledge appeared different to elsewhere on the wall. Perhaps there had been a window here once, for the ledge had no clear purpose. But she saw no reason for a window to face onto this dim place and to have the smell that rose from the drain wafting through it. The alley was bounded by buildings on all sides, with a rectangle of sky high above it. The drip of water from the drainpipes and the muffled noises inside the buildings, voices she did not have to respond to, made Violet drowsy.

"Ooh, you need to get more sleep, stop all those late nights with boyfriends," Mrs Tilly said, standing at the back door of the shop.

Violet could sleep deeply now and wake quickly. Even so, she was not sure if Mrs Tilly's tone was sneering or if she had imagined it. She washed the teacups left in the sink. More friends must have stopped by to chat to Mrs Tilly while Violet was on her lunch break.

"We have an order for collection on Friday. A 21st birthday party. We need to check what we have."

Mrs Tilly called out the order for the bouquets: one of pink and white flowers, one cheerful, and one with lots of foliage and discreet colour. Violet checked the number and condition of the flowers. Few would last until Friday, and if the order was for Friday, the party could be on Saturday and even if it was not no one wanted to buy flowers and have to throw them away the day after. But she said none of this.

"Check the oasis, do we have enough?"

Violet stepped into the alcove. "There are only three left and two containers."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Violet did not respond. But she recalled how Mrs Tilly had looked at her when she had previously mentioned the need to buy new supplies. She still remembered the words, and more than that, the way Mrs Tilly had laughed after she had said: "Ooh, look who thinks she runs the shop."

It had taken Violet's breath from her throat. Beatrice said she would get used to it; there were bigger things to worry about than Mrs Silly. She had laughed at that but the hurt had stuck, even if Beatrice didn't understand or didn't care how much it had stung her.

They spent most of the afternoon making a list of flowers to order. Violet wondered if she should remind Mrs Tilly that they had to account for other customers on Thursday, Friday and Saturday morning. She chanced it, not wanting to be berated in a busy shop later in the week. This time Mrs Tilly agreed. But she kept losing track of what was required even though she was writing it down in the order book while Violet moved from bucket to bucket. Violet repeated the quantities of snapdragons, poppies and gypsophila — Enoch had told her the name for the wiry sprigs with tiny white and pale pink flowers; she enjoyed the sound of the word.

"What could we do for the cheerful bouquet?"

Violet waited while Mrs Tilly looked at the flowers but no answer came to her. "Violet, you are good at this, tell me what flowers are cheery?

Violet picked two bunches — orange tulips and yellow daffodils — from the buckets and held them up for Mrs Tilly to see.

“Oh no, that’s too bright.”

Mrs Tilly settled for orange daises with dark green foliage, and a bouquet of pink and white snapdragons. But the last order for a modest arrangement with discreet colour Mrs Tilly did not understand and she said Violet should do it after she had made her a cup of tea. Violet was unsure herself what was required, but she chose foliage with pale grey-green leaves and dahlias with a brush of pink.

Mrs Tilly let Violet leave at four so she could get ahead of the afternoon rush, when the queues for the buses were so long that it could take more than an hour before there was space. As the bus chugged along, Violet, squeezed in near a window, watched the sun splash across patches of veld, its tawny browns golden in the late-afternoon light. By the time she walked along the last stretch of the dusty road towards Ma Dlamini’s house, the sun had gone. She was used to the sudden deep darkness, easily unlatching the front gate and walking around the house to the back door, sidestepping the raised root of the tree. The kitchen was warm.

Beatrice was at the stove dishing up. “You’re just in time.”

Ma Dlamini fussed around them, but did not join them. Violet realised she had eaten and Beatrice had been waiting for her. She wondered if Beatrice had explained her absence to Ma Dlamini. Perhaps, Violet realised now, Ma Dlamini had known all along where Beatrice was. She wondered why it was a secret, or if it was. Should she ask? But there was warmth in Beatrice’s chatter and she left it. Violet was so hungry she had to force herself to eat slowly. They scraped the pot for seconds and with the tea Violet made them she felt the unease of the past few days wash out of her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

After an unexpected downpour that morning, the sun was now shining strongly. It was unusually warm for late winter, and Violet started on the laundry on Saturday afternoon hoping to get the boys' clothes dried before sunset. Laundry was a Sunday task, but Ma Dlamini said nothing as Violet began filling up the tub from the tap at the back door. Ma Dlamini was in the kitchen finishing the baking for the Khuzwayo wedding. The wedding cake was in the lounge. Violet, Lwazi and Menzi had earlier stood in the doorway marvelling at the smooth white round cake with the dark pink dried flowers carefully placed on the top and the bride and groom's names written in gold icing. It was beautiful and when Menzi stepped forward to take a closer look Violet gently pulled him back and closed the door. It should be locked, she thought.

There were still the heart-shaped biscuits to finish. Ma Dlamini placed the cut-out shapes carefully and evenly on the baking tray. Before putting them in the oven she inspected each heart, mending one or two edges with the back of a knife. Menzi stood next to the table looking for a mixing bowl he could scrape with a spoon. As the biscuits baked, Ma Dlamini set to making the icing. The bride had asked for red. As Violet collected the laundry from the bedrooms she saw the tension in Ma Dlamini's shoulders and the pall of exhaustion on her face.

She scrubbed the stains out of the boys' shirts and pulled the line tight before hanging the laundry so it didn't sag under the weight of the washing. Ma Dlamini wanted sheets washed weekly and blankets every second week. If it was a blanket Sunday they had to go into the tub to soak, then they had to be wrung out and hung over the fence. Throughout the day Violet moved them out of the creeping shadows around the house and into the sun.

A shriek from the kitchen brought Violet rushing in from outside and Beatrice from the bedroom. They all looked in horror as the red food colouring spread across the table and dripped onto the floor, and saw Menzi with his arm frozen in midair across the table.

Beatrice rushed to grab a bowl and carefully scooped what she could of the liquid into it. "Do you have any more colouring?"

“No,” Ma Dlamini said.

Violet was stunned to see her lip quiver.

“Violet, take Menzi out of here,” Beatrice said.

“Where?”

“Anywhere, a walk. This order has to be finished today.”

Menzi and Violet looked at each other and then scuttled out the back door as both Ma Dlamini and Beatrice shouted at them: “Go!”

As they stood in the yard, Violet heard Beatrice say: “Don’t worry Ma, we’ll sort it out. The bride will have other things to worry about than biscuits. We have enough for pink, don’t we?”

Violet turned to Menzi, “Come.”

He didn’t budge.

“How old are you anyway?”

“Six.”

“Six-year-olds should know when to let their mamas alone.” She regretted the words when she saw the flash of shame in his eyes and watched him trying to push the crying back down his throat.

“Your mama is busy, let’s go.”

He followed her and when Violet opened the gate, he went on ahead.

Menzi led the way in a direction Violet had not taken before. He told her of the neighbours who had a little dog he liked. It had big ears and short legs. They stopped at the gate, but the dog did not emerge.

“There are frogs down the end of the road at the vlei, do you want to see?” he asked Violet.

She nodded.

“Can you hop?” Menzi asked.

“What?”

“Can hop you like me? I am a good hopper.”

And Menzi hopped on his left leg and then his right, asking Violet to tell him which leg was better.

“You try,” Menzi said.

She shook her head.

“Oh, so you can’t hop. You should just say then.”

“I can hop.”

Menzi didn't believe her.

"Look then." Violet hopped along, laughing when she switched to her left leg and almost fell over.

They hopped together, Menzi taking the lead. As they came to the marsh, a bird flew up calling as it flapped away. Menzi led her round the muddy edge, testing the ground for firm patches. He said they had to stand very still if they wanted to see any frogs. The hot sun baked the back of their necks as they looked into the water. The vlei was in a small depression and Violet could hardly see above the tall reeds. Then a low croak. Menzi and Violet smiled at each other. They waited, but there was no responding call.

"Maybe it's going to rain again soon," Violet said.

"Ma says not until summer."

"It's almost spring, maybe it will be early this year."

They carried on around the vlei, and once on higher ground Violet could see how small it was. She saw two men enter the vlei from the other side and then disappear into the long grass.

"Let's go back, we'll walk around."

"It's quicker through the vlei."

"No, let's go that way," Violet said, pointing to the road. "You can show me around."

She took Menzi's hand and pulled him along, only slowing her pace and letting go of his hand once they were walking well between the rows of houses.

Menzi was mostly Zee, sometimes Enzi and when he once had helped himself to a third slice of cake Beatrice called him Many. Even Lwazi had laughed at Menzi's mouth framed by icing.

Violet smiled at him as they walked home. He loved to talk. About all things. The size of a puddle in the road, whether he could jump over it, and Violet must watch while he attempts it, and should he do it again. She was worried that his shoes, already covered in mud, would be ruined. She told him to take them off. She could wash the shoes before his mother saw. Menzi walked the rest of the way home barefoot, not jumping but wading through each puddle they came across, rating the puddles from better to best. They met Lwazi, his older brother, on the street as they approached the house. He had been kicking a ball around, but he stopped and watched them approach. As they reached him, Violet smiled at him. But Lwazi turned away and walked ahead of them to the house.

Ma Dlamini was sitting in the yard. The boys ran to her. She held them close and said: “I saved you some biscuits.”

As Violet walked into the kitchen, she looked back at the three of them, Menzi sitting on his mother’s lap, Lwazi standing next to her. Ma Dlamini looked up at him, holding his hand, laughing at something he was telling her. Violet turned away and walked to her room, an ache somewhere inside her.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Keturia stood in the kitchen next to the stove stirring the porridge, as the older girl told her what to make her sister for lunch when she came home from school. She set the bowl of porridge in front of Poppy and looked hard at Bella, who was packing her lunch in her school bag and then tied up her long hair in a few movements of her hands. It was a day their mother would not be getting out of bed.

"Oh sorry, Ketty. Of course, you know what to do, cook whatever you think best," Bella said.

Keturia turned to begin on the dishes that were already soaking in the sink. Ketty. Bella had started it a few days after she began working here and the young girl had picked it up. Poppy. In the first months, she was everywhere Keturia was, sitting on a tree stump in the yard while she pegged the washing on the line or at the kitchen table while she cooked. Always with a book.

Keturia had accepted Poppy's offer to help with the laundry, but the clothes that the girl hung up were not pegged properly and fell to the ground, requiring them to be rewashed. Keturia had had to sweep and mop the kitchen floor for a second time in one day after Poppy let the thin scrapings from carrots she was peeling fall to the kitchen floor while she peeled the bitter top layer and then offered Keturia sliced carrots, each piece a different size, for the dinner she was preparing. It was better now that the girl left her alone, she would anyway be Bella's age in a few years.

Keturia began with the bedrooms. But she left the room where Felicity was still sleeping. The beds had been made by the girls, but their clothes needed to be hung up. In the bathroom a wet towel lay next to the laundry basket. She sprinkled Vim into the bath and scrubbed away the ring. After flushing the toilet several times and wiping the basin, she used her foot on the wet towel to wipe away any marks on the floor. Then she took the washing outside to soak in the deep basins in the laundry room next to hers.

It was only after Keturia had folded the newspapers strewn on the floor in the lounge and opened the curtains with two sweeping movements, the hooks raking on the railing, that she noticed Felicity sleeping on the couch. She stood and looked at her. She hadn't stirred. The woman was always changing her mind from mid-morning to late morning about the tasks she wanted Keturia to do. It was better when she slept the day away.

Keturia had forgotten again to get the laundry done early. Now that it was mid-morning, the sounds next door rose above the wall. Shouting, she thought, from the guards. Sometimes a sharp cry in response.

The Dickensons' home and the house next door were separated by a double garage that fitted snugly between the two houses and a shared driveway. The backyards were divided by a low breeze-block wall, the crusts of cement on the top of it looked like someone had forgotten to finish building it, leaving it at waist height.

It was from the kitchen window next door that Keturia could now see the Smit woman watching her, brought there probably by the volume of the radio that Keturia had turned up to drown out the sounds from the prison next door. If Mrs Smit had complained about the noise, she hadn't heard anything from Felicity or Mr Dickenson.

It was Selina, who worked for the Smit woman, who had told Keturia that young boys were kept right on the other side of the prison wall she was now looking at. The two of them, Keturia and Selina, had stood in their backyards, talking over the wall, looking through the high wire fence on the other side of the lane at the small grimy windows set high up in the red-brick wall of the prison.

Keturia had meant to ask Selina how she knew, but like the other women who worked next door, she had left after a few weeks. Anyway now she didn't need to ask her; she had not forgotten the frightened eyes of the boy she had seen in the yard that night. On still nights, she thought she heard weeping and was startled awake once at the call of "Mama", but when she lay still to listen she heard nothing more.

She turned up the volume on the radio in the kitchen and left the back door open as she finished the washing.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

"Mom? Mom? Are you sleeping?" Poppy leaned over Felicity, watching the rise and fall of her chest.

Felicity, sitting in a small deck chair, lifted the brim of her hat. "Did you enjoy the boat ride?"

"We went right into the middle of the lake."

Bella sat down on the picnic blanket, spreading her dress carefully over her legs. "Poppy thought Dad was serious when he said he was tired and we would have to swim back to the boathouse."

"I have worked up an appetite," Harold said. "Anything left in the basket?" He stretched out on the blanket, resting on his elbow.

Poppy took an apple out of the basket and held it up.

"Any oranges?"

"I am going for a walk," Bella said.

"Take Poppy with you," Felicity said.

"No, I want to go on my own. Just around the lake."

"Be back in half an hour for tea."

Harold lay back and covered his face with his hat. On a small table that he had set up next to Felicity's chair were pencils of varying thickness, each a different shade of charcoal. Felicity inspected one, picked up another and resumed sketching a willow dipping over the lake, a small boat beyond on the water. "Read to me, Poppy."

Poppy flipped through the poetry book her mother had passed to her. She read out the poets' names. Felicity shook her head, until Poppy said Wilfred Owen.

Felicity smiled at Poppy. "That's a good choice."

"Oh, do we have to?" Harold said beneath his hat.

"Why not? He's a great poet?"

"I just don't feel for Wilfred right now."

Earlier the bright sunlight had forced them to move under the mottled shade of a large tree. Now that the sun was well across the sky the soft sunshine that crept towards their picnic blanket was warm and welcome. Poppy lay next to her father, and like him put her sun hat over her face. She looked at the leaves and the pale sky above her through the loose weave of her hat. Then she closed her eyes. She could hear the scratch of pencil on paper and the soft snores from her father, children screeching, a duck honking, nearby a ball being kicked was accompanied by shouts of delight and dismay. The smell of dry grass and dust mingled in her nose.

Poppy woke up. Her father was no longer next to her.

"Bella should be back by now," he said.

She sat up.

Harold was standing with his hands in his trouser pockets, gazing towards the lake. "Poppy, go find her."

She ran down the sloping lawn towards the boathouse and then back to say Bella was not there.

"Well, go around the lake."

She hesitated. Long shadows stretched from the trees across the grass, and the water of the lake was now glossy and black.

"Go on Pops, we want to have tea."

Past the boathouse and the kiosk was a short bridge that ran to her left over the dam wall. She stopped to catch her breath. The lawn ahead rose up to the swimming pool. Bella was sitting on a bench next to a man Poppy had never seen. Their heads were bent together. Poppy walked towards them. As she did, Bella laughed, lifting her face. Poppy saw a sheen of sweat on her skin and tendrils of damp hair near her temples. It was then Bella saw Poppy. She stood up quickly, her face shining, as she ran down the slope towards the lake.

Bella strode ahead of Poppy, but when they had passed the lake and were at the edge of the grass embankment, she slowed, waiting for Poppy to catch up with her. A chilly breeze had sprung up and Felicity said it would be better to have tea at home.

As Harold pulled off into Lower Park Drive, Bella looked at Poppy and said softly to her: "Remember the ruby necklace."

Poppy looked at her blankly.

"The one Granny couldn't find just before we left the farm. I know where it is."

Poppy looked at Bella and then towards her mother in the front seat — it didn't seem like she had heard Bella's threat.

Bella turned her head to look out the window at the houses flashing by as they drove home.

When she heard Bella running her bath, Poppy closed her bedroom door and prised open the loose section of floorboard beneath her bed. She checked that the ruby pendant was still in its small box. The letter was also still there. She has so far made out, in the tiny cursive writing, the words "Dear Mrs Dickenson" and "your eldest daughter". She tried to read the letter again.

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The short walk to school meant Poppy sometimes arrived early. Mrs Pleasant was in the classroom, bent over a stack of exercise books on her desk, red pen at the ready. She looked up at Poppy but didn't greet her. She carried on marking and Poppy turned to go. The school grounds were mostly empty. The few other children who had also arrived early were huddled in groups in the weak winter sun, but Poppy didn't really know any of them. At one corner of the playground was a sandy patch beneath a cluster of pine trees. She stayed there until Brian found her. They played noughts and crosses with pine cones on a grid drawn in the sand until the bell rang. Poppy and Brian had been moved to the back corner of the classroom, next to the window that looked out on the veranda that ran past the classrooms. From here she could watch who was sent to sit outside or to the principal's office. One boy, who was sent to stand outside his classroom most days, would make faces at her.

"Well, Poppy could tell us about that, can't you Poppy?" Mrs Pleasant said.

She hadn't been listening.

There were a few sniggers, but then Mrs Pleasant turned her attention elsewhere.

"Your people farm," she said to a boy with thick black hair and equally black eyes, who sat in the same back row as Poppy. "The Italians farm, don't they?"

The boy shrugged and when Mrs Pleasant turned to the board, he looked at Poppy and rolled his eyes and flashed a smile that caught Poppy in the stomach. She tried not to smile back.

Poppy and Brian shared their lunch under the pine trees. Today the new boy joined them.

Brian offered him a jam sandwich, but he shook his head and sat watching them eat.

"You from Italy?" Brian said

He nodded.

"What's it like there?"

The boy shrugged.

Poppy turned to Brian and whispered. "I don't think he speaks English."

"Do you speak English?" Brian asked.

The boy looked at them and then away at the playground.

"What is your name? I'm Brian," he said slowly and loudly.

"Tommaso."

"Tomato?" Brian said.

The boy laughed and then the smile again that Poppy couldn't look at but couldn't look away from either.

"Tommaso," he said, sounding it out slowly and loudly, emphasising the S.

Brian laughed and the two of them walked off together talking loudly and slowly to each other. Poppy watched the easiness between them. They didn't turn to call her to join them. A group of girls on the edge of the field were playing with a skipping rope, but when Poppy walked up they ignored her.

She sat on a grassy slope to watch the soccer game. Tommaso was better than anyone. Poppy tried not to smile at his speed and skill, which in one manoeuvre resulted in Frank falling over. It was a foul, the opposing team declared. Penalty, penalty, they called. But Tommaso ignored them and with an assist, a ball kicked crossways across the pitch, he scored again. The opposition kicked him off the field after his fourth goal. Poppy couldn't hear what Tommaso said as he strode off the field, but a teacher's head snapped around at his words and she came marching over the field, gripped his upper arm and pulled him into the school buildings.

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Poppy and Bella stood next to their mother's bed. Felicity lay so still. They couldn't see her chest rise. Spit had crusted at the corner of her mouth.

Poppy leant over her. "Is she dead?"

Bella walked to the dressing table and returned with a compact. She held the mirror in front on Felicity's mouth. She showed Poppy the misted mirror. "Drunk."

Bella flung the compact on to the bedspread and walked out, shutting her mother's bedroom door hard. Poppy stayed. She lifted the glass next to her mother's bed and smelled it. She slowly pulled open the bedside table drawer. It was scattered with pens and pencils, a

notebook and loose photographs. She bent down to look deeper into the drawer and then put her hand into it to feel towards the back. Her mother didn't move. On the other side of the bed, she looked in her father's bedside table drawer. There were papers shoved in and a brochure with a photo of a large house with nurses walking in the garden. Her mother moved and Poppy quickly slipped the brochure back in the drawer. She walked back to stand next to her mother. On her bedside table was her engagement ring with green stones set around a central diamond. Poppy picked it up and squeezed it in her palm, not letting go even when the stone, digging into her skin, began to hurt. Then she held the band and pressed the stone into the soft skin on her mother's upper arm. Her mother jerked. Poppy dropped the ring onto the bed and covered her mother with a blanket, then closed the door with a quiet, careful click.

When Poppy arrived home from school, Selma was sitting in her mother's wire chair in the front garden.

"I've been waiting for you." Selma smiled and stretched out her arm. "Come on, Pops, I need a hug."

She stopped just short of Selma's outstretched hand and looked towards the house, but she couldn't see if her mother was standing behind the net curtain in her bedroom.

"Felicity's not here," Selma said.

Poppy leaned into Selma, who hugged her hard. She could smell apple shampoo on Selma's damp hair.

"I've missed you, Pops. It's so good to see you." Selma pulled Poppy onto her lap.

She felt Selma's bony legs shudder under her.

"My goodness, you are too big for sitting on my lap. When did you get so grown up?" Selma laughed. "Let's get some lunch."

Her hand hurt as Selma, walking unsteadily across the lawn to the house, gripped onto it tightly. Once in the kitchen, Selma sat at the table. Poppy made a pot of tea and set biscuits on a plate. They ate in silence.

Poppy, sneaking glances at her aunt's face, noticed deep, dark hollows under her eyes and a bruise on her left forearm, which Selma covered with the sleeve of her cardigan when she saw Poppy looking at it. "Fruit is good for you."

They both looked at the two apples in the fruit bowl on the kitchen table, their skins starting to wrinkle.

"What are you reading?" Selma asked.

"*Anne of Green Gables*."

"Will you read to me?"

Poppy lay on her narrow bed, squeezed in between Selma and the wall. Selma lay so still next to her and after reading two chapters, she looked down at Selma's face to see if she was sleeping. She could see tears running down the side of Selma's nose, pooling at the flare of her nostrils. She pulled a blanket over Selma and left the room.

Her mother was in the kitchen. "You've seen Selma?"

"She's sleeping on my bed."

"She'll stay in your room until she leaves, hopefully it will only be a few days. Your father will get her a ticket on Saturday."

"Where's she going?"

Felicity didn't answer as she walked out the kitchen. Poppy leaned with her back against the counter, waiting for her mother's bedroom door to slam, but still flinched when it did.

An extra wire chair had been brought from the backyard to the front garden. Selma sat in that chair, Felicity on her chair. A bottle of gin, slices of lemon on a saucer and tonic water were set out on the small wire table. Poppy was high up in the Belhambra tree, sitting astride one of its thick branches. She couldn't hear much of the conversation between her aunt and mother, but she stayed hidden in the canopy watching them as the sun set, casting its last strong rays onto the back of the nurses' home until that too was in shade and then darkness. She could see her father in the brightly lit lounge sitting in his chair reading the paper. When he stood to close the curtains, he peered out towards Felicity and Selma, then yanked the curtains closed.

As the noise of the evening traffic going up and down the hill died down, Poppy could hear their voices clearly in the still night air.

"It's a new life, Selma, away from all this," Felicity said.

"I don't want to go."

"Would you rather this?" Felicity said.

"No, I would not choose to live next to the most god-awful prison in the country. Well, one of them."

"And you forget the maternity hospital and the mortuary."

"Oh my God, yes, cradle to grave. Having that reminder every day. And if you step out of line you end up next door."

Felicity gave a short, hard laugh that became ragged crying. Poppy started to climb down the tree, but the crying suddenly stopped. Poppy froze, but she couldn't hold the position for long and slowly manoeuvred herself towards another branch, lower down the trunk. She saw both women look back towards the tree at the noise she had made.

Selma topped up her glass. "But what kind of life will I have after what I've done?"

Felicity didn't reply.

"I didn't think it would be me. I didn't think I would be the weak link. The weakest."

"Well, you shouldn't have got involved in all that, Selma. They'll destroy the country. Everything we've built."

"We've built? Built for whom?"

"Oh, don't start that. You've been enough trouble. Harold could have lost his job, being associated with all this nonsense. As it is he is not very popular, being English. And, I suppose, being Harold."

They both snorted with laughter.

Felicity reached for the gin bottle, giving it a gentle shake to judge in the dark how much was left.

Poppy's hands were numb in the icy air. It was too cold to remain in the tree and she tried to climb down quietly. They heard her.

"Is that you, Pops?" Selma called. "Come on over, give me a kiss goodnight."

Poppy walked over the damp cold grass and kissed Selma's cheek that was flushed from the gin.

"You don't give your mother a kiss?" Felicity asked.

Poppy leaned awkwardly towards her mother. She smelled powder and sweat as she kissed her mother's cheek before quickly stepping back.

As she walked towards the house she heard Selma ask: "Why do you treat her like that? Is it because she's Harold's?"

Poppy waited for her mother to answer, but Felicity said nothing.

Poppy sat on her bed as Selma packed a small suitcase. There wasn't much in it. Selma said it would be summer in England. She could get winter clothes there when the weather turned cold.

When she was finished Selma sat next to Poppy holding the book *Desert Magic*. "I forgot I gave this book to you. Alba loved it. I read it to her so many times, and when she learnt to read, she read it over and over again." Selma read a note on the cover: "*Stories from*

a soldier in the Western Desert to his little daughter. Maybe she thought her dad had written these stories for her."

Poppy watched Selma's hands stroke the book cover. The bruise on Selma's forearm was beginning to fade. "Is it because Alba died that you did communion?"

Selma frowned. "Communion? We're not Catholic, Poppy. Alba's funeral was at an Anglican church. Not that I believe that anymore."

"What don't you believe?"

"Oh, heaven and hell and all that. Who gets to heaven and why. There is enough hell here on earth." Then she stopped talking. "Oh Pops, don't let me be a misery. It's our last night together. Let's play paper dolls."

"But I thought that's why they put you in jail."

Selma laughed, that sound that bubbled up and then deepened to a throaty gurgle. "Oh Pops. Communism, darling, not communion."

They sat on the patterned rug on Poppy's bedroom floor and dressed the paper dolls, making up stories of where they were going. Poppy started when she saw her mother standing at the door, watching them. Selma looked up at Felicity and held her cold stare until Felicity disappeared into the dark passage, leaving the bedroom door ajar.

Poppy wanted to go to the airport but her father said no. She stood in the driveway as he loaded Selma's suitcase into the boot and then she saw him hand Selma an envelope.

"I can't take it, Harold. Thank you, but I can't," Selma said.

"You'll need it, Selma. It's a gift."

Selma put the envelope in her handbag. "Thank you for everything, Harold."

Poppy looked away as her aunt and father hugged.

Poppy gave Selma a card she had made. As Selma held her she said over the top of her head to Bella: "Look after Pops for me."

Poppy looked back at Bella standing on the front porch. As Selma got into the car Bella ran down the steps to garden and hugged Selma hard. They held onto each other, until Harold said they had better get going. As her father reversed down the driveway Poppy saw Selma bury her face in her hands.

Poppy and Bella stood in the driveway long after the car had disappeared.

Poppy looked up at her sister. "She'll come back."

"No, she won't, Pops. She can't come back."

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Poppy's bedroom had not been re-wallpapered when they moved in, but she liked the blue and white flowers and the blue birds perched on leafy twigs. She wasn't sure what they could be, barbets perhaps. There was only space for her bed, which the door knocked against each time it was opened, a side table with a drawer that she was careful not leave anything precious in, and a narrow wardrobe.

The room looked out onto the wash line in the backyard, and when she lay on her bed she could see almost to the top of the retaining wall that marked the boundary between their property and their neighbours' garden. It was sandwiched between the kitchen and the bathroom and almost opposite the lounge, so she could track the water working its way through the house either to the kitchen sink, or, in the early morning and evenings, to the bathroom. She usually knew where everyone was.

Once Poppy had gone to bed, her parents sat in the lounge reading. When the volume of the radio was turned up, she waited for the raised voices. If she listened carefully for the scratch of a rat in the ceiling above her, the outrage in her mother's voice and the pleading in her father's responses receded. Poppy could track the rats' movements above the patterned ceiling of her room. It was warmer than Bella's room, being smaller, but also because it faced west, and that was why the rats liked to be above her room. She closed her eyes and resumed her story of the rats.

The parents were Henrietta and Jack, and the children Silver, Ruby and Pearl. Henrietta enjoyed knitting clothes for her children and they were well-dressed little rats, with colourful clothes and small woollen hats to keep their little heads warm in winter. Now that it was spring, their mother was sewing up summer dresses. Henrietta read to them each night after she had tucked them into bed. Their beds were made of dry grass, which their father Jack regularly replenished to keep them comfortable. Jack lit a small fire each evening, using twigs and dry leaves he had collected from the garden in the late afternoon. They ate their dinner around it.

Poppy decided Silver was the youngest rat, and also the cleverest. She was very inquisitive, and took her siblings Ruby and Pearl on expeditions, when their father Jack was out finding bedding and kindling and their mother Henrietta was searching for dinner. The three little rats had left the ceiling, scurrying down the drainpipe into the garden, first sniffing around the compost and then darting under the shrubbery and into the lane. But then a sudden storm broke, and with the noise of thunder and the flash of lightning, they lost their bearings, and as the downpour intensified the water rushing down the lane swept them away.

Poppy drifted off to sleep, thinking of Silver and Ruby and Pearl, and wondering now that they were stranded on Sam Hancock Street how they would find their way back home.

Keturia was in the kitchen preparing dinner, and when she noticed Poppy standing in the doorway, she said: "There are no onions or potatoes."

They both looked at the bloody cubes of meat in a dish on the counter next to the stove, the oil already spattering in a pot.

"Go up to Costas to buy some. You can put it on the account," Keturia said.

"Where's Bella, can't she go?"

"Off with her friends, I suppose."

Poppy's sandals were too small for her, but she chose them over her boots, which made her feet sweaty now that it was starting to get warmer.

Keturia handed her a list. "Get carrots, tomatoes, celery as well. I'll need them for tomorrow night's dinner."

Poppy fetched her library books, but Keturia told her to leave them, she needed to go straight there and back if supper was to be ready at six. Halfway up the lane, Poppy undid the buckle of her shoes to ease the chafing. But then the buckles flapped as she walked. She took them off and walked up the lane barefoot, putting them back on when she reached Kotze Street.

The grocer was five blocks away and when she got there blisters had come up on her feet. She took two onions and a small bag of tomatoes. She forgot about the list as she wandered through aisles with fruit piled up. She stood at the counter waiting to be helped. But the man behind the counter called forward customers by name to ring up their sales. Waiting, she looked around the store. Bella. Bella was standing near the entrance close to a young man. They were talking. He was laughing, his head tilted to one side, he briefly rested his hand on Bella's forearm. Bella was wearing a dress Poppy had not seen. The store was filling up as people stopped in on their way home from work, and Poppy lost sight of them.

She turned back to the counter. More people had pushed in front of her. “I am Poppy,” she said loudly, thinking the man needed to know her name if she was going to be served.

“What you want little girl?” the man said in a gravelly voice. Then he shouted over her head across the shop. “Hey, Nico, we have customers.”

“Coming, Papa.” When Nico joined his father at the counter, Poppy saw it was the young man Bella had been talking to.

Nico rang up Poppy’s order, then wrote down the sale in the account book. He stopped for a minute. He looked up at her, and then down again to write down the price of Poppy’s order under the Dickensons’ account. “You tell your pappy to come into the store soon, OK?” He winked at her and before she took the packet, he shouted to a man sweeping the store. “Elias, add two oranges to this packet.” Poppy got the oranges as she left the store.

Bella was waiting for her a few stores down. She took the packet from Poppy, peering in. “Why did you get such small potatoes?”

“It was too heavy. It’s just for supper tonight.”

There was still enough sun on this side of the hill, and Poppy and Bella went to the park, where they sat on a bench each eating their oranges. Poppy kept looking at Bella but she couldn’t catch her eye as her sister gazed purposefully into the distance.

They sat in silence, Poppy wondering if Brian was right that the mine dumps in the distance still had gold in them: “Your dress is nice.”

Bella gave Poppy a sharp look, but when Poppy smiled at her, she said: “Thank you.”

Then they both laughed.

It was much cooler now with the sun setting, and Poppy, with her shoes off, let the light breeze cool her blisters.

A small mewing sound caught their attention. It came from a shrub near their bench, Poppy went down on her hands and knees to take a closer look. A kitten sat there mewing, its little mouth with a pink tongue open. She tried to reach for it.

“Leave it, Poppy, its mother must be around somewhere.”

But Poppy wouldn’t leave it, and as the sun began to dip below the horizon, Bella agreed Poppy could take it home.

Keturia had left two casserole dishes in the oven, one with rice and the other with a potato- and onion-less stew. Their parents’ bedroom door was closed. Poppy went next door to ask

Mrs Smit what was needed to feed a kitten, and came back with a small portion of cat food. They left the kitten in the walk-in cupboard at the end of the passage, with a knee rug folded in a corner on the floor and bowls of food and water. Poppy checked in on it before she went to bed; it was mewing and so she brought it to her room, where it curled up next to her and fell asleep.

Poppy returned the kitten to the cupboard before she went to school, and when their mother emerged from her room that afternoon, she complained to the girls of a headache, and that there had been a plaintive mewl disturbing her sleep. Poppy and Bella tried hard not to look at each other, but when they did they could not contain their laughter.

Keturia soon found the kitten in the linen cupboard and relocated it to Poppy's bedroom, where it liked to sleep under her bed. Felicity was delighted with the small creature. Poppy watched her mother hold the kitten on her lap and then lift it up to her face, nestling against its soft fur. She spoke to the kitten in a soft cooing voice. "What shall I name you?"

Poppy stepped forward and took the kitten from her mother, saying, "Her name is Marigold" as she walked from the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Poppy tipped the cardboard over the edge and flew down the grassy slope, her hair flying behind her. She closed her eyes against the dust from the dry grass and bit her bottom lip. She wouldn't shriek this time, even as her fingers, clutching the cardboard on either side, grazed the small stones. She beat Tommaso this time and at the bottom of the hill stood up triumphantly, walking over to where he lay on the grass.

"How did you do that?"

As he stood, Poppy pointed to the slope she had come down and then they looked back at the section of slope he had chosen.

"That's way steeper, that's cheating."

Poppy shrugged. "Well, you are heavier than me, so you go faster."

She trudged up the hill, slipping a few times on the shiny grass and patches of sand and gravel. Tom followed her, laughing as he too slipped a few paces. By the time they reached the top, Poppy's knees were grazed and Tom's pants torn.

"Brian, what do you think? Brian? Did Poppy cheat?"

They both turned to look at him. "Brian," they said together.

Brian stood at the top of the hill watching the two of them helping each other up the last steep section of the grassy slope.

"Come on, Brian, it's your turn," Poppy said.

"No thanks, not today." Brian sat on his haunches, a crease of worry between his eyes. "Let's have those crunchies."

Poppy took out the tin and flask from her bag. Santie and Tantie stood nearby, watching. Brian indicated with a flick of his head that Poppy should also offer some to them. She grudgingly handed over the tin, but wouldn't drink from the flask once they had had their turn. The one girl had long, uncombed hair that was slipping out of a hairband. The other had almost no hair, it was cropped so close to her skull. They had the same green eyes and were both thin — all elbows and knees — and their skin had a grimy tinge to it.

"Let's show Tom Nugget Hill. It's much steeper than here," Poppy said.

Brian sipped his tea slowly.

"What's up with you?" Poppy asked.

"Oh, I just don't feel like it. I better get home actually."

As he stood he winced and started gingerly down the slope.

"Higgins?" Tom said to Brian.

Brian nodded.

"I still have a mark," Tom said, pulling down the elastic band from his shorts to show Brian a welt that was fading on his buttock.

Poppy laughed but stopped when she saw the look in Brian's eyes.

"What you do?" Tom asked Brian.

"Mrs Pleasant said I cheated," Brian said.

"Did you?" Tom said.

"Sitting next to Poppy?" Brian said.

Tom laughed.

Poppy didn't. She stood and turned away. A rush of icy air cooled her burning face. She rubbed her neck where tendrils of hair that had escaped from her pony-tail tickled her neck. "Let's go. We'll walk with you." Poppy said, packing away the flask and tin.

It was Poppy and Tom together; a few paces behind them came Brian with Santie and Tantie. Poppy looked back to see Brian with his head down and then saw him wiping his eyes with the back of his hands. She stopped to wait for him.

"What's wrong with you?" Poppy asked him.

"I want to go home," he said.

"Why? Your mom isn't even there."

Brian pushed Poppy hard. She fell backwards onto the stony ground.

"What'd I do?" Poppy said.

"At least my mom isn't a drunk," Brian said.

"Well your mom probably sent you to live with your aunt because she doesn't want to live with you. Where is your mom anyway? She's probably dead. But no one has told you yet. You want your mommy?"

Brian rushed forward to kick Poppy, who was still lying on the ground, but his foot missed her and instead kicked up dust. "At least I have brains. That's why my mom sent me here. Not stupid like you."

Poppy laughed, looking at Tom for support.

He looked away. "Come on, Brian, let's go."

As Brian and Tom walked on Santie walked past Poppy and stepped on her hand. Poppy yelped and then scrambled up, picking up a stone that she flung at Santie's back, a raw scream coming from her throat. Santie bent down to pick up a stone. Spinning around, she flung it hard at Poppy. It hit her on the chin. Tantie ran towards Poppy, kicking her in the shin. Tom pulled her back, but as she turned Poppy lunged towards her, grabbing a handful of Tantie's hair. She yanked so hard Tantie fell backwards crying. Tom pushed Poppy away, his hand hard against her chest. All four turned their backs on Poppy and walked away. Poppy stood still. Her heart was pounding. Santie walked with her head bent towards Tantie.

She watched them cross over Joubert Street Extension and disappear around the corner onto Sam Hancock. Two women who had been walking down the hill had stopped to watch.

One called to Poppy. "Are you OK, dear?"

The other woman, short and wide, said: "You're bleeding." She handed Poppy a handkerchief she took from her small brown handbag. "You know there are some rough types around here now. You shouldn't be wandering around on your own."

Poppy dabbed her chin, and then looked at the bright blood on the handkerchief, wondering if she should keep it or hand it back.

"Do you know those children? Are they from around here?"

"They're at my school."

"A coloured boy?"

Poppy didn't know what they meant, but she saw a look pass between them. She tried to walk on.

The taller woman stepped forward, blocking Poppy's way. "What school do you go to, dear?"

"And the other one, what's he?" said the short one.

"Greek, probably. They're coming over a lot. Or Portuguese," the tall one said to the short one.

"He's Italian. Tommaso is Italian," Poppy said.

They looked at each other again.

"And the other boy, the coloured boy, where does he come from?"

Poppy walked past them. As she waited to cross the road, she watched the women walk on down the hill, talking and shaking their heads as they did.

Poppy stood in the empty bath. With the tap running she washed the dust from her shins. After drying her legs she left the towel in the bath. She inspected her face in the mirror above the basin; with the base of the mirror worn away she had to stand on her toes to see the scab that was forming on her chin.

Her mother's bedroom door was closed. Keturia had told her to be quiet, she was sleeping. She pulled out her dictionary from the small bookcase in her room, knocking the Matryoshka doll over onto the floor, its parts scattering. Poppy stopped and waited, but there was no sound from her parents' room across the passage. All she could hear was the distant sound of the radio in the kitchen tuned to Keturia's station.

Poppy took the letter from the hole beneath the floorboard, and once up in the Belhambra tree, astride a wide branch, she read it again. It was signed with a scrawl. Poppy could make out "Mrs" but not the surname. She knew delicate meant fragile but there were other words she needed to look up. She had brought her *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*. Indiscretion was "not discreet, imprudent, injudicious", fraternising was "to associate as brothers, to seek brotherly fellowship", appropriate was "to make to be the private property of anyone, to take to one's self as one's own, and also "peculiar, suitable". Mediterranean was defined as "a long-headed dark race of white men, of medium stature, inhabiting south Europe and North Africa". She knew the letter concerned Bella.

She slipped the letter back into the dictionary, but before she put the book into the bag that was hooked on a knob on the trunk, she looked up the word coloured: "Having colour: having a specious appearance, deceitful: of the complexion other than white: of mixed descent — partly European, partly of darker race: not of European race".

Poppy put the book away. If deceitful meant mean, then she agreed Brian was that. But she didn't know what specious was and since none of them lived in Europe, except Tommaso until he came to South Africa, she wasn't sure what those two women had meant. She lay forward on the wide branch, catching the cut on her chin. She flinched and touched the scab with her fingertips. It began to bleed again. It was too windy to stay up in the tree much longer and when she saw her father turn into the driveway, she climbed down and ran across the lawn to open the garage for him.

"Thanks, Pops," he said as he climbed out the car and opened the back door to get his briefcase. Walking out the garage he saw Poppy with the remnants of dust and spots of blood on her clothes. "Goodness, you have been in the wars. Did you fall out of the tree again? You better get in the bath and clean up."

Poppy followed him through the backyard into the house.

After leaving the car keys on the hook near the back door, he set his briefcase on the kitchen table, clicked it open and took out The Rand Daily Mail and The Star. Poppy followed him into the dining room where he slipped the case into a narrow space between the sideboard and the wall.

He walked up the passage removing his jacket and tie. “Where is Bella?”

“I don’t know. Out.”

“Out where? And your mother?”

“Sleeping.”

But when he opened the bedroom door Felicity was not there, just the imprint of her body on the bedspread. Harold stood at the end of the twin beds, his fist clenched. Poppy watched him from where she stood at their window. Felicity’s coat was not hanging at the back of the bedroom door. Harold slammed the bedroom door closed behind him as he strode along the passage, the wooden hanger on the hook swinging back and forth violently.

Poppy heard him bellow. “Keturia, where is the madam?”

“In her bedroom.”

“No, she is not.”

Harold grabbed the car keys and rushed out the back door. He flung the garage door open. Poppy watched from her parents’ bedroom window; the car whined loudly as he reversed hard down the driveway.

It was just Poppy at home. As it became dark, Poppy was alone in the house. Bella hadn’t returned. Keturia left dinner in the warming drawer, closed the curtains and said good night as she shut the back door. Poppy wanted her to stay, but didn’t ask. She got into bed with Marigold and lay still, listening for the sound of her father’s car or the back door opening and Bella’s footsteps up the passage. It was so quiet she could hear her heartbeat drumming in her ears. A wail startled her but as she listened to its rising pitch she realised it was from the other side of the wall so it couldn’t hurt her. Still, her palms were clammy. She burrowed under the blankets breathing slowly into the dark cave in her bed. She woke suddenly. She listened hard, but it was quiet. Then a thud.

Her father’s voice. “Help me pick her up, Bella.”

“No.”

Then the retching and crying Poppy knew came from her mother.

“Just run the bath then.”

“She is your wife. You do it.”

“Isabella, do not speak to me like that.”

Poppy got out of bed and crept down the passage. She stopped just outside the kitchen door. Her mother was lying on the floor, her stockings torn, one shoe off. She lay very still. Poppy couldn’t see if she was breathing. Her father’s hands were shaking and his bottom lip was caving in as if he was going to cry. He looked up at Poppy, she looked away.

Bella brushed past Poppy and stormed into her bedroom.

Harold followed. “What were you doing there? Dressed like that, what were you doing there? Who was that you were with? Who is he, is he Italian or Portuguese? Is he?”

“He helps to get your drunk wife in your car and all you are worried about is where he comes from. You didn’t even thank him.’’

“Thank him? For what? For taking my sixteen-year-old daughter to a dance without my permission.”

“A dance?” Bella laughed. “It’s not 1940, Dad.”

Poppy flinched at the way Bella said the last word. She remained at the kitchen door watching her mother trying to get up from the floor. She stepped back into the dark dining room as her mother crawled through the doorway and then clung to the door handle to stand. She didn’t see Poppy, or if she did, she said nothing.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Felicity didn't like the young librarian that Poppy was so enamoured with. Her dress was too too short, in an orange that was too loud. She agreed with Poppy, once they had left the library, that she was pretty, but Felicity thought it was in a way that was too showy.

She felt a ripple of annoyance run through her as she noticed Bella watching her. The two of them, Bella and Poppy, had been exchanging glances ever since they left the house. They didn't seemed pleased when she insisted on a walk. Her words about their father had been inappropriate, but then she couldn't help herself when Bella said to her that Harold had told them she wasn't to leave the house.

But it wasn't Birdie or Harold that was occupying Felicity's mind as they wandered through Joubert Park. It was the name Nico.

It had started while they were checking their books out, with Poppy in a sulk as she watched Bella and Birdie chatting. As soon as they were out of the door Poppy had turned sharply to Bella and told her to leave Birdie alone. She was her friend.

Bella had laughed, telling Poppy Birdie had lots of friends. Felicity was more interested in how Bella knew that, given that Birdie was several years older than Bella. She felt an uneasy shift, wondering how she had missed this new part of Bella's life.

"How do you know so much about Birdie?" Felicity asked.

"She's friends with Nico."

The name would have caught Felicity's attention anyway, but it was also the way Bella had frozen, just for a moment, after she said his name, as if she immediately regretted mentioning it. Felicity looked at her elder daughter and saw a flush spread across her face.

"Who is Nico?" she asked.

Bella had shrugged too casually.

Poppy had run ahead. Felicity and Bella walked on in silence for a while. "You know, Bella, you will meet lots of people in city like this. Not all of them will be suitable."

"Suitable for what?" Bella said.

Felicity raised her eyebrows at Bella's tone.

Bella looked ahead as if she didn't care what her mother's answer may be.

Felicity persisted, even though she wasn't sure how to put it. "Well, some people aren't suitable, well, as friends." Her voice trailed off.

They came to a bench and sat down, both staring ahead.

"I assume with a name like Nico he's from Portugal? I know there are lots of them coming here now. Italians and Greeks as well. But people from different cultures, have, well, different ways."

Felicity got no response from her daughter, but she noticed the hard set of Bella's jaw.

"His parents will want him to marry a Portuguese girl."

Bella looked at her mother, then quickly looked away.

But Felicity had seen the feeling in her daughter's eyes. She knew it so well.

They said nothing more, and despite the cold shade that crept over the park they remained on the bench, watching Poppy, who had taken off her shoes and was wading in a small pond.

Eventually Bella said: "You should tell Poppy we no longer live on a farm."

They both laughed, and Felicity took Bella's hand and squeezed it. She wasn't sure if Bella squeezed back.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

The long Saturdays and Sundays loomed over Keturia as Friday approached, so for months now she walked every Saturday afternoon, leaving as soon as the rooms, passage and veranda had been swept and the kitchen cleaned. She headed off in the same direction each week, sometimes varying her route slightly. She walked through the streets of Hillbrow to Louis Botha Avenue and then from there to Houghton Drive to The Wilds.

Early one Saturday, when the grass was still wet from the dew, an elderly man who walked with a stick had taken her up the stony paths that wound up the hill and held his hand out for her to take when they reached the bottom of a small section of steep steps. They stopped at a vantage point where they could see the city beyond the wooded valley. When he bid her goodbye, his gray bushy eyebrows rising in tandem with his smile, he spoke in a language she did not understand. As she watched him walk away she wondered if he felt as much of a stranger here as she did.

She sat undisturbed on the wide lawn that dipped down to a small pond. It was easy from here to reach the pavement when the groups of girls with boyfriends arrived and spread themselves about on picnic blankets.

Keturia then wound her way through streets with large houses at the end of long driveways that disappeared past clipped hedges. In some gardens the house was set so far back she could only see the high roof and the many chimney pots. She only had one fireplace to clean out,what would it be like to sweep out six, she thought.

She greeted a man weeding a flowerbed on a wide pavement. He stood and chatted to her, keeping her there for longer than she intended with a friendliness that Keturia realised, when she walked away, came from the overall that she had worn that day, choosing it and her scuffed shoes to provide anonymity from the stares of white women who drove past, or the ones she occasionally encountered as they pushed a pram along these shady streets.

Keturia headed to Yeoville, where she had come across a small park — with just enough space for a swing, a slide and a few benches — in between the mostly three- and four-storey blocks of flats. It was busier here, with families walking home from shul, and others working, watching children as they slid down the slide over and over again.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

The temperature had dropped suddenly after weeks of warm summer weather. The sun was an orange smudge between the rooftops. The cool evening air seeped through Violet's clothes. She pulled her coat tightly around her. Beatrice was striding ahead of her. As Violet caught up, she noticed a small section of Beatrice's hem had come undone and scuff marks on the back of her heels.

Violet's breath was little puffs of cloud ahead of her. "Do we have to walk so fast?"

"Come on. Let's keep going. We'll warm up."

The route was unfamiliar to Violet. She wondered now why she had agreed to come. They walked through narrow alleys that bent and turned so many times that she worried how they would get back home. She could hear snatches of conversation from inside the houses they passed and someone running, the hard, quick footfalls so urgent it startled her. Beatrice carried on, sure-footed on the uneven ground and unperturbed by the sudden deep darkness.

Violet stumbled. "Beatrice, I can't see. Wait."

Beatrice stopped and took Violet's hand. They walked liked that despite the confines of the alley until Violet heard soft snatches of music and laughter that became louder as they walked into a small yard, off of which were several doors opening into dimly lit rooms. A tall man, with a belly that stretched ahead of him, greeted Beatrice with a tight embrace.

Laughing, Beatrice, extricated herself. "Jack, you will crush me to death one day."

They remained close together. The stillness between them made Violet look away.

Then he pulled up his trousers over his stomach. "We haven't seen you for a while. We must talk."

Violet looked from one to the other but could not make sense of what passed between them.

She stepped forward. Jack looked at her and then back at Beatrice, the cheer gone from his face. "Who's this?"

"Vee. She's staying with us at Ma's house."

Violet stepped forward to speak, but Beatrice's sharp look silenced her.

He turned into a room to their right filled with loud conversation. Despite his size, he melted into the dim shapes that Violet could just make out in the lamp light.

"You are Vee when you come here."

"And who are you?"

"Trix."

"Why?"

"Vee and Trix. We could start a duo. Can you sing?"

Beatrice headed towards another door and once inside the room pushed past people standing and chatting to a corner where she bought them drinks. They turned back and Violet could now see two small tables, with chairs around them and against one section of wall a sofa.

"Trix, come over here," a woman called.

Beatrice edged back through the throng, with Violet following her. Those at the table moved, either shifting around it to squeeze in another chair or standing up to head outside, leaving space for the two of them. The woman nodded at Violet, a thin, tight smile on her face that vanished when Violet smiled back.

"Lolly's gone," the woman said, leaning towards Beatrice.

Violet saw the stiffening of Beatrice's shoulders but couldn't hear her response. She tried to follow their conversation but it was all short sentences, single words and long silences. The drink warmed Violet and the ache in her shoulders eased. A stream of people came into the room and left with drinks. The men wore suits and some had hats. One man, who stood almost directly opposite Violet while he waited in line for a drink, had shoved his tie into a pocket. The top two buttons of his shirt were undone. The light caught his gleaming skin in the dip at the base of his throat. The woman next to him wore a butter-yellow dress that was tight to her waist and fell over her hips to just below her knees in soft, creamy folds. She wore the same red lipstick Beatrice did. His hand rested on her waist and she leaned towards him, but when he handed her a drink she kissed on him on the cheek, whispered something in his ear and then moved to sit at the table next to Violet. She winked at Violet as she took a sip of her drink, and this time Violet's smile was returned.

Violet was hot in her coat and cardigan but she kept them on. Her dress had been washed so many times the dark blue fabric was perishing in some places. She felt like a child in her flat shoes surrounded by tall women talking of things she didn't understand. She looked up. Jack was watching her. His cool gaze and the slow dip of his head and raised eyebrows felt like a warning. She looked away and when she looked back he was gone.

Someone turned up the volume and as if by prior agreement everyone rose and danced. Some swayed to the rhythm, others stood in the small spaces between the tables in loose embraces. Even Beatrice and her thin-lipped friend joined in, punctuating the song with sharp claps, their voices rising as the song came to an end. Violet took a small sip of her drink, it smelled like the brew her grandmother made.

A young man approached her, dressed in a suit, his tie still on. He bowed towards her, offering his hand. Violet looked around for Beatrice but she had gone. He then turned sideways to offer her his bent elbow and she stood and joined him to dance in the tight spaces between the tables. He had clear eyes and a shy smile. They carried on dancing for another song that was greeted with approval, including from Violet, who also knew it. With the dim light and the man dancing close to her, she stopped searching for Beatrice. Even with the smoke stinging her eyes, she was happy not to be in the yard back home in Lenyenye, watching from the outskirts of the fire as her grandfather and his friends drank and talked under the pinpricks of light above while the firelight flickered on their faces.

They stopped to sip their drinks and taking her hand he led her outside. The cold air was refreshing. As they headed to the edge of the yard, the music and voices receded. Violet stopped, not wanting to walk further into the darkness.

He leaned against a wooden post, lit a cigarette and looked at her as he slowly exhaled the smoke. “I haven’t seen you here before.”

The smell of aftershave cologne and a pleasant earthy scent tingled in Violet’s nose. She pulled her coat around her to keep out the cold air. “I came about six months ago.”

“From where?”

“Near Pretoria.”

“Where near Pretoria?”

“Actually, closer to Tzaneen.”

“So is it Pretoria or Tzaneen? They are not that close, you know.”

As they laughed they edged closer.

“And you?”

“And me. Well, let’s see. Been here all my life.”

“I thought this place was new.”

“Oh, not here in Meadowlands. I mean Alex.”

He moved towards her and took her hands. Violet stepped back. “I must find Bea, I mean Trix.”

“I’m Stanley.”

"Vee."

As she walked away her neck prickled as if his eyes were on her, and when she turned to look back at him before stepping into a room, Stanley was still leaning against the wooden pole, but she couldn't be sure in the darkness that he was watching her.

"Vee! Vee!" Beatrice called.

Violet didn't at first register her name, then she saw Beatrice gesturing to her. She sat down in a warm corner next to Beatrice, listening to snatches of conversation. Beatrice was saying it's time now, otherwise it will never end. Jack spitting out the word republic like it tasted bad. But she didn't try to follow the discussion, which was mostly in whispers. Beatrice did a lot of the talking, while Jack and Thin Lips nodded.

The butter-yellow-dress woman sat next to Violet on the armrest of the sofa, and as they watched those who came in and out she shared her commentary on the patrons, making Violet laugh. The man who was unsteady on his feet, holding onto the furniture to move around, was named Mr Weaving Wobbler when he suddenly found himself with no support unsure how to move forward. The woman who walked in, walked out and walked in again in quick succession, all the time with a scowl on her face, was called Miss Misplaced Lover.

Stanley came in and looked around. Violet watched him. When he saw her, he bowed slightly and mouthed the words "I'll be seeing you", or that's what Violet thought. She smiled at him, but when she saw the cold stare from Beatrice, who was watching them, Violet looked down and when she looked up again Stanley was gone.

The walk back seemed quicker than the walk there. Jack followed them holding a short, thick stick in his left hand that he occasionally slapped into his right hand, startling Violet. He stopped a few yards from Ma Dlamini's house waiting in the shadows while they unlocked the back door.

Violet's head swam and she lay down fully clothed, hoping for sleep to come quickly. Violet heard Beatrice remove her coat, flop on the bed and push off her shoes one at a time.

She seemed to be asleep, but after a while said: "I didn't think a country girl was Stanley's type."

Violet breathed in sharply. She turned her back to Beatrice and laid her hand on the cold, rough wall next to her bed, then felt under her mattress for the little dog her grandmother had made for her. Holding it close, Violet troubled the frayed stitching on its left paw.

Violet had a small section of the windowsill behind her bed to stack the magazines and newspapers she still wanted to read, and a shelf below the drawer in the beside table that Beatrice used. But Beatrice's belongings found their way onto her shelf and all along the short windowsill. There was a line strung from one wall to the other, suspended over their beds, where they hung their stockings and undergarments to dry overnight. The chamber pot was under Violet's bed, and when she asked why, Beatrice shrugged, pointing to the suitcase under hers.

"Why do you have so many clothes?" Violet asked.

Beatrice looked surprised at the question and retorted: "I look fabulous in beautiful clothes."

Violet smirked, but not wanting to take the argument with Beatrice further continued reading her magazine. She had two thick blankets now. One Beatrice had bought for her as a welcome gift, the other Violet had purchased three months into her job. Her mother had given her sheets on which she had embroidered Violet's initials in blue cotton. She used one sheet as a cover over her blankets to shield them from the dust that blew into the house whenever a door was opened, the fine particles settling over everything. It had not rained for months. The dust made the weekend's cleaning and laundry an even more laborious task, and Violet had remained in bed on Saturday, telling Beatrice she was not well enough to get up and help. Her skin felt clammy and as usual, with the heavy flow of her period, she felt queasy. She was grateful for the hot cup of tea Beatrice brought into the bedroom for her and that Beatrice left her to drink it alone. She sipped it slowly while listening to the household and the sounds of the day outside as the neighbours also began their weekend chores.

Violet fished in the crack in the wall behind her bed for the pouch she kept her savings in, along with a record of her earnings and expenses. She had accumulated very little in the months she had been working. She had planned to return home, at the end of the year, but the warm clothes she had needed, the money she had sent to her granny, the rent, which Ma Dlamini said would increase in January, and the cost of getting to and from work, meant that some months there had been nothing to save.

She pulled the blankets over her head and lay in the dark, trying to breathe slowly and quell the panic that rose up in her chest as she thought of the years she might have to stay in this place, like her mother.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

By nine o'clock Mrs Tilly had still not arrived to open the shop. Violet had been waiting for two hours. Today the bus was on time. She had stood in a watery patch of sun on the corner keeping her eye on the shop or walking the length of the block and back trying to get warm. The hot days, one after the other, that summer promised had not yet come. The weather had turned cool overnight, and a chilly wind blew along the streets.

She was unsure what to do. She took a chance and walked around the block, reckoning that by the time she had done the circuit Mrs Tilly would be there to raise an eyebrow at her for being late. It was better than standing still shifting from foot to foot and getting cold stares from those walking by. She walked fast but the shop was still shut when she returned. She peered through the window, as if Mrs Tilly might appear from deep inside the dim interior. But it was clearly still closed. From the corner of her eye, Violet saw the man who owned the shop next door standing in the doorway of his store, watching her. Violet realised he did not recognise her. She wondered if she should continue walking, but instead greeted him and asked if he knew where Mrs Tilly was. He barked words at her she could not decipher. Mrs Tilly had said he was from Germany. A police van drove by and Violet decided to leave; she was being noticed.

She walked down Clarendon and then left along Sam Hancock then left again into a lane. She stopped at the small gate that led into the Dickensons' backyard. The house looked shut up. The curtains on one of the back windows were closed and the back door was shut. She rattled the gate. There was no response. A gust of wind scattered detritus that had gathered in a corner of the yard. Then the back door opened and the knot in her stomach eased as she saw her mother step down slowly into the yard carrying a laundry basket.

Keturia looked up. "Violet. What are you doing here? What happened?"

"The shop is closed."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It's the third day."

Her mother set the laundry basket down and fetched a broom that she handed to Violet, indicating with a nod of her head that Violet should start sweeping. When she was done, her mother nodded to a second laundry basket she had fetched from inside, telling her to leave the whites to soak in one of two deep sinks in a small room at the edge of the yard. Violet let her hands soak in the hot water that filled the sink in steaming gushes from the tap.

Then they sat in the kitchen, with mugs of sweet tea and the scones Violet had brought for her lunch, spread now with butter and jam Keturia had taken from the fridge. A small heater with its bright orange bars glowed in one corner.

The grandfather clock chimed. Violet looked at her mother, who sipped her tea and took a bite of her scone without registering the sound. Then it was quiet again, still, like no one lived here.

"Where is everyone?"

"The girls are at school. Mr Dickenson is at work."

A door deep in the house opened and then a few moments later clicked closed. Violet looked at her mother.

Keturia rose to switch the kettle on again and set three rusks on small plate. "Don't worry, she won't come through."

While Keturia took tea to Mrs Dickenson, Violet stood and peered into the pantry. The shelves all the way to the high ceiling were crammed with canned food, and tins of different sizes, one decorated with red and white stripes, others with bright flowers or pictures of children and puppies, baking tins, a mixing bowl. And five glass jugs of different sizes and designs, Violet counted them.

Keturia settled back at the table with a bag of potatoes to peel. She handed Violet a small knife. "How is Ma Dlamini and Beatrice? That girl. What does she do?"

"A journalist for the newspapers."

"They must pay well, with the clothes she wears."

"How do you know, Ma, what clothes she wears?"

"She's here sometimes."

"Here?"

"No, not at the house. In Hillbrow."

Violet was surprised. Besides the first day that Beatrice had escorted her to work, she had only come into the flower shop one other time. "Doing what?"

Keturia shrugged.

"Alone?"

“With other people, usually. All smartly dressed.”

“But where exactly?”

“On Kapteijn. She went into a building there. Is that where she works?”

Violet didn’t know.

Keturia switched on the radio. They listened to details of the upcoming election, a section of sun brightening the kitchen. They finished the laundry and once it was hung up on the line, they sat in the sun in the yard now that the wind had dropped.

“How is it here, Ma?”

Keturia said nothing.

“Ma?”

“No better or worse than anywhere else.”

“Is she sick?”

“Drinks. Hits the young one in the face, but mostly doesn’t speak to her. I don’t like her, but still, she’s only nine.”

“And you? Is she OK to you?”

Keturia looked away. “She complains sometimes. But they all do. What’s the shop like? It’s better in a shop. You don’t have to sleep there.”

Violet drank the last of her tea, then held the still warm mug in her hand, wondering if she could say it, that she wants to go home.

A woman walking past the gate called a greeting to Keturia. They talked for a while. When the visitor walked on, they returned to the kitchen. Violet washed their mugs and plates, while Keturia dried and packed them away under the sink.

“Ma, how is Granny?”

Keturia was bending down pulling out the polish and dusters from a cupboard. She winced as she stood up her right hand rubbing her back. She took a letter from the pocket of her uniform. “This came last week.”

Violet read it. The writing was a round, careful cursive, only the last line and the name was written by her grandmother. Her grandfather was ill and there are doctor’s bills to pay.

“You need to send more money,” Keturia said.

“Ma Dlamini says the rent will go up.”

“We’ll look for somewhere cheaper. What about the building where the shop is — those flats above, isn’t there space there on the roof?”

“Well, I don’t know if the shop will open again.”

Her mother nodded. “You better start looking for something else. They may need someone next door. I’ll ask.”

Violet looked away. “I better go, Ma. If I get back early I can get supper started.”

“It’ll get easier, Violet, when it gets warmer. I always miss home when it’s cold.”

Each day for another week, Violet travelled to the shop, but it remained closed. And when it did reopen, once Mrs Tilly recovered from a fall, her workload increased. She was left to make up all the bouquets and manage the orders for what flowers needed to be replenished. Violet was given a set of keys to open up in the morning and on some afternoons she was left to run the shop when Mrs Tilly went upstairs to her flat to rest. But when the Henkelmans discovered Mrs Tilly’s absences a young white woman took charge. Jilly, a few years older than Violet, liked to talk, a constant chatter while Violet cleaned or arranged flowers or supervised deliveries.

For weeks now Violet had heard about the general election and whether Jilly should vote, but if she didn’t vote then she couldn’t really complain then about the government, could she? That’s what her dad said. What did Violet think? But she never waited for Violet’s answer on that or any other question.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

A persistent whistle caught Violet's attention, but when she walked around to the front garden there was no one at the gate and those walking past either nodded a greeting at her or passed without looking at her. She went back to twisting, section by section, the water out of a blanket that had been soaking in the tub, and once the whole blanket had been wrung, she started again, squeezing the thick cloth. The work required two people but Beatrice had said she was off to town and had left Violet with the chores. The whistling again, this time not a sharp call but the tune of a song she recognised and when it stopped a man's voice picked up the words. She walked back to the front garden, startling a small bird that had been foraging in a creeper twined around the fence. This time she returned to the backyard around the other side of the house, and then she saw a man, at the edge of the corner, peering round into the backyard, still singing.

She crept up behind him, and when she was close enough to touch him, she joined in the song. He leaped around, startled and they both laughed. Stanley held one hand against the wall of the house to recover from the fright, Violet with hands against her stomach trying to quell the mirth that bubbled out of her.

The neighbour came round her house to see what the commotion was, and her disapproving look helped Violet and Stanley to compose themselves for a moment, only to fall into fits of giggles again once she had gone back into her house.

Violet took deep breaths and then said: "You know Ma Dlamini does not like anyone coming into the yard without an invitation."

"Well, Ma Dlamini is not here, is she?"

"How do you know?"

Stanley didn't answer but walked into the backyard.

They both looked at the tub and the blankets.

"Let's go for a walk," Stanley said.

"I am trying to finish the laundry, and then you come along and play tricks on me."

"You shouldn't take laundry so seriously. The thing about laundry, is that it

always has to be done again in a week's time, which means you always have another opportunity to clean it better the next time."

"Tell Ma Dlamini that."

"I will."

"You wouldn't dare."

Stanley laughed. "All right, well, let's get it done and then go for our walk." Stanley left his jacket and hat on the backrest of a kitchen chair that had been brought into the garden and rolled up his sleeves. They finished hanging up the blankets, and Violet showed him which flowerbed he should empty the water into — this week it was the plumbagos' turn to get the laundry water.

"Just give me a minute," Violet said, as she carried the kitchen chair inside. She took a small cloth and rubbed her shoes clean, washed her face and then scrabbled through the wardrobe looking for suitable clothes for a walk. Besides her work clothes, she had a maroon skirt and two dresses. She chose the blue one. She had bought it for further visits to Sindi's, but when she had shown it to Beatrice she had pulled a face and said it looked like a dress for church. Beatrice had offered to take her shopping for more suitable clothes for nights of dancing at Sindi's. But Violet loved the flare of the skirt as it fell from the snug bodice over her hips to below her knees. The dark blue fabric had a slight shimmer to it.

It was a pleasure for Violet to walk slowly with nowhere in particular to go, even with her shoes kicking up dust on the sandy road that left a fine coating on them. The sky ahead of them was a brilliant, big blue and the mid-afternoon light was softening to a golden glow. They walked along streets Violet had not walked, and some she had, but only in the dim light of early morning or evening as she rushed to or from work. Stanley greeted people, some he stopped to chat with and others, Violet noticed, he briefly nodded to.

There was with no shade to walk in and the sun was bearing down from above and with the heat rising from the compacted road, within a few blocks Violet's shoes were full of grit.

He was easy to be with. She didn't think he would be interested in what a shop girl did all day, but he was.

"What's your boss like?"

"She's all right."

"Oh please, no boss is all right. Let me guess. Young or old? I reckon an old woman. White, of course. She's sweet as syrup one minute and snapping at you the next."

Violet looked at him, unsure.

"Am I right?"

"You're right. Sort of. I have a new boss, she's young."

"My boss is a bastard."

Violet started at the last word.

"Yes, a bastard, bastard, bastard, bastard. Shocked you, haven't I? He thinks he is so up there with the best thinkers but then still checks that the tea lady hasn't taken any ginger snaps. No one can touch those biscuits. You could be dying of hunger and he would not share his bloody biscuits. We call him Ginger, and not only because he has ginger hair."

They had walked in a loop and were approaching Ma Dlamini's house. They fell into an easy silence. At the gate, Stanley asked Violet if she would meet him in town on Saturday when she had finished at the shop. She agreed, only worrying later how she was going to explain her absence to Ma Dlamini and Beatrice.

She watched Stanley walk off. He turned around several times to wave, each time smiling at her. She walked round the back of the house only when she could no longer make him out along the dry, dusty road. In the backyard Violet eased her feet out of her tight shoes and washed the grit and sweat off her feet under the cool water from tap, then she sat on the back steps, only noticing now the huge, high thunderclouds that hung above her.

The following week Beatrice was away from the house most evenings when Violet returned from work. She ate her supper alone at the kitchen table, washed and then slept, falling asleep so quickly and deeply that she was surprised to see Beatrice beneath her blankets when she woke to get ready for work.

But on Friday night Beatrice was there. She lay on her bed directing Violet to try on her clothes. She insisted. First was a green dress with brass buttons on two breast pockets and sleeves that reached her elbows. It fell just below Violet's knees and the fabric was smooth on her skin.

"That one is a definite. It's perfect for you," Beatrice said.

The candle on Beatrice's face emphasised the small scar near her upper lip and the deep shadows under her eyes. Violet noticed that her normally trimmed nails were ragged.

"Put the brown coat over, the dark one. No, rather the tan. I'll need the dark one. You need shoes. There must be a pair in there that will fit you."

Violet looked at the bottom of the wardrobe and pulled out the black boots. "These?"

"No."

She tried on skirts and blouses, most of which were too large for her, but Beatrice said they could easily be taken in. Violet longed to sleep but Beatrice insisted she sit still while she dabbed red lipstick on her lips, telling her to part them slightly while she did so and then press her lips together like so, showing Violet the motion. Then to close her eyes while Beatrice brushed her eyelids with eyeshadow. Such a strange sensation. And to keep them closed while she softly brushed her cheeks with rouge. At the sound of the compact clipping shut Violet looked up at Beatrice to see her smile at her — or was it at her work, the effect of the make up on Violet's face?

"Wear that tomorrow night. I'll do your make up. I'll have some competition," Beatrice said.

"What's happening on Saturday?"

"We'll see."

Violet went to sleep with the sweet smell of make-up on her face. She rose before Beatrice was awake. In the dark she quickly dressed and checked her bag before leaving for work, only realising as she walked into the back of the shop and glanced at herself in a small mirror stuck on the side of the cupboard that she still had on the remnants of last night's make-up. She took her handkerchief and with a dab of water wiped off the eye-shadow.

After the shop had shut at lunchtime and she had made the journey home she found Beatrice reading in the backyard. She was sitting on a chair she had brought out from the kitchen, her legs in the sun, her face in the shade of the peach tree.

She had not yet told Beatrice about Musa wanting to know of her whereabouts. It seemed too late now. Beatrice might turn on her, as she had before, when she had not divulged information as soon as she would have liked. It was odd the things that could set Beatrice off, like when Violet had not told her until days after that a pair of shoes Beatrice had wanted were on sale. They had passed the shop with the shoes near the station, and Violet knew, didn't she, that Beatrice wanted them. Didn't she? Beatrice had persisted, pressing Violet as to why she had not told her sooner that the red high heels were on sale.

But today Beatrice smiled at Violet and resumed reading, leaving Violet no space to say anything about Musa. She was happy anyway to lie on a grass mat she had spread on the ground and drift off to sleep.

She woke to a strange silence. There was a sudden change in the atmosphere, like just before a storm when the air seems to sink around you. Yet the sky was still blue, pale now as the sun would set soon. Beatrice was gone and so was the chair. Sitting up, the section of

street she could see from Ma Dlamini's yard was empty — no one was walking with shopping bags with children trailing behind them. No sounds of an afternoon gathering, the laughter and raised voices that sometimes went on late into the night.

She stood and after dusting off the mat she had been lying on she draped it over her arm and walked around to the front of the house. The empty street chilled her and she quickly retreated inside. Ma Dlamini looked at her sharply and nodded at her to close the door. Beatrice was in bed, entirely covered, but with the stiffness of her body, Violet knew she was awake. She sat on her bed as the darkness came down, listening to the banging on doors nearby and the harsh voices that accompanied it. Then louder knocking that was closer this time. Then the sound of someone running past the house.

"Is this the police? Are they coming here, Beatrice?"

"Go to sleep, Violet."

"What do they want? Who are they looking for?"

Beatrice did not answer.

The bright sunshine pushed against the curtain as Violet woke. She longed to sleep all day but Ma Dlamini expected them to attend church. She made enough noise in the kitchen to wake them, leaving the steaming teapot on the kitchen table while she finished getting ready. Beatrice and Violet sat in silence sipping their tea and then dressed quickly to be ready by quarter to eight. It didn't take long to walk there and by the time they were making their way in the cool morning air and the bright sun Violet began to enjoy the freshness of a day that did not include the shop.

But today when Violet woke and checked her watch she saw that it was past nine. She sat on the edge of her bed. Beatrice must have gone with Ma Dlamini. Her bed was made, with the sheet folded over the top of the tightly tucked blanket. Violet smiled, it was so unlike Beatrice to bother making her bed. Violet made tea, swept the kitchen, and started on the laundry. A button on one of Menzi's shirts was loose. Violet found the tin with needle and thread and sewed it on tighter, and then added it to the clothes soaking in the tub.

Once the clothes were washed and hung, she cleaned the lounge and then their bedroom — she made a half-hearted attempt to sweep under the bed with the broom. Beatrice always insisted she kneel down to clean under the beds with the dustpan and brush. When Violet had finished the room, she reconsidered not doing under the beds properly and knelt down in the narrow space between their beds to clean underneath them, Violet saw that the suitcase was gone. She flung open the cupboard. Beatrice's clothes were there. But not the

dark coat, the grey cardigan and the black boots. Her stockings and the two thick skirts were also gone. The shelf for Beatrice's make-up and lotions was empty, except for one lipstick. Violet sat down on her bed, her heart pounding as she twisted and turned the red stick of colour, over and over again.

CHAPTER THIRTY

It was the last day of the term. The children were let out just after noon. Poppy trailed behind a stream of children pushing through the gates. Some went down the hill to Parktown, but most turned up the hill to Hillbrow, disappearing into side streets quickly so that by the time Poppy crossed Sam Hancock and reached the other side of the rugby field there were only a few stragglers left.

Poppy stopped to sit on the rugby stands set against the stone wall of the prison. It was hot and dry, dust kicked up by a breeze scattered across the field. On the highest level there was still shade to sit under. She took her lunchbox from her satchel to finish her peanut butter sandwiches. The stone behind her was cool against her back.

Two girls stepped onto the stands from the far end of the first level and walked, one in front, one behind, towards Poppy. The long wooden planks set across the tiers of the stand wobbled as they approached her. Poppy watched them, hoping they would carry on past her and disappear. It was Santie and Tantie. Poppy could never remember which one was which. She sniggered to herself at their names. They must be younger than her, Poppy thought.

"*Wat* you doing?" the long-haired girl asked.

"Eating," Poppy said. She wondered why they were talking to her.

"*Hoekom sit jy hier*?"

Poppy shrugged. She packed away her half-eaten sandwich, and picked up her satchel, before stepping down the four levels of the stand as quickly as she could.

"*Poppie?*" the girl said as Poppy stepped onto the dusty field.

Poppy turned to her with narrowed eyes. "It's Poppy, with an O. Not *Poppie*."

"*Jammer*," the girl said.

Poppy began to walk away.

"Brian *kom*..." the girl said, her voice ending in a whisper as she looked at the short-haired girl to provide the missing words.

But she offered no help, looking down at her feet.

"You good at soccer. *Die beste*. Brian said," the long-haired girl tried again.

“Hey, sorry I took so long,” Brian shouted.

They looked around to see him chugging along the field with his satchel bouncing on his back and a soccer ball under his arm.

He dropped his bag on the ground, and opened it to pull out four oranges. He gave one to each of the girls. He smiled at Poppy.

“I have to go,” Poppy said.

“Stay, we can play two, two,” Brian said.

She hesitated.

“Come on,” he said.

She joined them at the top level of the stand in the thin strip of shade to eat her orange, leaving her satchel lying with the other bags in a heap on the edge of the field. They ate in silence, sucking the juice from the fruit before eating the flesh. The girls dropped the peels into the dark, dirty space beneath the stand.

“How can you eat the peel?” Poppy said, laughing at Brian as he finished the whole fruit.

He shrugged. “So we play two, two. Poppy, you play with Tantie. Santie, you play with me.”

Poppy snorted. Brian looked at her, surprised.

“OK,” Poppy said as she stood up and walked down the stand to hide the hot blush spreading over her face. She didn’t know why Brian was friends with these girls.

Santie and Tantie and Brian took off their school shoes.

“You can’t wear shoes if we’re barefoot,” Brian said.

“Why not?” Poppy said.

“You’ll foul us,” Brian said.

“Well, put your shoes back on then.”

“Come on Poppy, are we playing or what?”

“Why do you get to make the rules?”

“It’s three against one, so take your shoes off.”

Poppy took them off. The pitch was hot under her feet. The ground was mostly sand with a few patches of crisp worn grass that without rain had not yet grown this summer. The afternoon sun burned her face.

Brian designated the goals with stones he found at the edge of the field. They played hard. Poppy was surprised at the speed of the two girls. Brian and Santie were in the lead,

until Tantie passed the ball to Poppy and she kicked it into the goal. This was followed by another goal from Poppy.

"Offside, offside," Brian said.

"We are not playing offside. Get on with it," Poppy said.

They tackled hard, the dust an orange mist around their ankles. The occasional stone stepped on hard in pursuit of the ball made them gasp. The ball sometimes ended up under the stand or rolled away far beyond the goals, and they argued over who was going to fetch it. The game ended when Santie collided with Poppy, knocking her to the ground. She fell down clutching her shin, trying hard not to cry.

"*Jammer*," Santie said.

Poppy got up and pushed Santie so hard that she stumbled backwards onto the ground. Poppy stood over her as if to kick her. Santie looked up at Poppy shocked, and then her chin dimpled and her lips quivered.

"Poppy. Stop. Why did you do that?" Brian asked.

"She knocked me over."

"It was an accident. Stop it, Poppy."

Poppy didn't like the way Brian was looking at her.

She stomped off to get her bag. Sitting on the lowest level of the stand shoving her shoes and socks into her bag, she saw four women all dressed the same at the end of the field. One of them walked towards them with a limp. The beige jacket buttoned tight across her stomach had shiny gold-coloured buttons that glinted in the sun. The matching skirt was riding up towards her knees. As she got closer Poppy saw that the jacket had epaulettes.

When Santie and Tantie saw the woman coming towards them they fetched their bags and ran towards her. Poppy watched as she held out her hands and bent her head, left then right, towards them as they walked away.

Brian walked up to Poppy and sat next to her on the stand. He followed Poppy's gaze to Santie, Tantie and the woman as they crossed Sam Hancock and then through a gate of one of the small houses built in a row and attached to each other.

"Is that their mother?"

"Yes, the house comes with her job. Like your dad."

Poppy looked at him sharply. "What job?"

Brian tipped his head back.

"What do you mean?" Poppy said, looking behind her, in the direction Brian had indicated with the tilt of his head.

“The prison, she works there. A guard, I guess.”

Poppy looked back at the small house. The woman was standing at the gate. Poppy thought she was looking at her, and wondered if she knew Selma was her aunt. “I better go.”

“See you tomorrow?”

“Maybe.”

Poppy left Brian practising goals. As she reached the end of the field, she turned to watch him. She could just hear his commentary as he lined up for a penalty kick and then the cheer from the crowd after he scored. He didn’t look her way.

Poppy turned into the lane towards her house. As she walked into the garden she was surprised to see Keturia turning the soil in the vegetable patch.

“What are you doing?” Poppy asked.

“We can get some cabbages in, it may already be too warm. Mustard maybe as well. Go look in the vegetable cupboard for onions with green shoots.”

“Why?”

“Good to plant with cabbages, keeps the bugs away.” Keturia showed Poppy a tin filled with envelopes. “I found this on the top shelf of the pantry.”

Poppy recognised the tin. At the farm it had sat on her mother’s desk next to her diaries and two gardening books. The desk was in an alcove just off the kitchen, close enough for her mother to sit there while keeping an eye on whatever was cooking on the stove, or while she waited for a cake to rise in the oven. Felicity would read and make notes in her diary — sometimes referring back to entries in previous years’ diaries or checking something in her gardening books.

Poppy looked through the tin. The envelopes, filled with seeds, were stacked upright and marked on the top right-hand corner in Felicity’s handwriting: cabbage seeds, harvested October ’60; mustard, harvested ’59. There must have been thirty packages with aubergine, mielie, radish, beans, peas, marigold and calendula seeds. Poppy opened some of the packages. She was surprised that the tiny balls of linseeds were still encased in their papery shells and were still shiny as she crushed one pod open.

“It’s just the right time to plant tomatoes. We can plant the peas and beans at the end of summer.”

“These are from the farm. Does my mom know you’re planting them?”

Keturia didn’t answer.

Poppy went to the kitchen and found two onions that looked like they had green shoots and then looked into her parents’ bedroom. The lounge was also empty. She went back

to her parents' room and stood in the middle. It seemed different. She realised the net curtain was pulled open, when it was usually closed. The room was brighter, with the window filled with a view of the garden. Rosebuds peeped up above the windowsill, beyond the still brown lawn was a thicket of shrubs with bright fresh small green leaves.

As she walked out of the bedroom Poppy noticed that the books that were usually stacked high on her mother's bedside table were not there. The dressing table had been tidied, small jars of cream and her hairbrushes had been packed away.

She returned to Keturia in the garden. "Is my mom here?"

"You can help me. Rake the leaves, we can start a compost heap," Keturia said, pointing to the leaves scattered in the backyard.

"Where?"

"Somewhere shady."

"Come look," Keturia said, showing Poppy the swollen nodes on the plum and peach tree. They worked together until the sun dipped behind the hill. Poppy piled up the leaves she raked from the lawn and placed loose bricks around the vegetation to keep it compacted. It would do for now, but it would need a fence. By the time Keturia sent Poppy inside to bath, the soil in the vegetable garden had been entirely dug over, except where patches of clover had survived the winter. The woody vine of a granadilla that had been hidden beneath the rampant pumpkin, its leaves brown for lack of sunshine, Keturia had cut back to encourage new growth.

While Poppy was in the bath she heard Bella's voice and then the scratch and screech as she put on a record in the lounge. The water was murky from the dust of the field and the dirt of the garden. She lay back, just tall enough now to use her toes to turn on the hot tap. Poppy heard Bella's feet tap and slide along the hardwood passage floor as she came past the bathroom door, dancing up and down the passage with the record at full volume.

Poppy joined in. *"Come on baby let's do the twist … My daddy is sleepin', And mama ain't around, Yeah, daddy just sleepin', And mama ain't around … We're gonna twisty twisty twisty, Till we tear the house down…"*

The steam in the bathroom had chased a spider from the behind the bath up the wall. Poppy watched as it made its way to the corner of the ceiling, where a brown stain was blooming. A nip of air came through the bathroom window, and Poppy let some of the water out the bath and topped it up with hot water. She scrubbed her fingernails and wiped her face, but she didn't bother washing the rest of herself.

“Where’s Poppy? Take that awful record off,” said Harold, his heels hitting the wooden floors in the passage hard. Then his footsteps retreated.

Poppy strained to hear more, but she could only just make out the higher pitch of Bella’s voice and then her father’s voice again. She waited.

“Poppy, Poppy! Get out the bath. I need to talk to you,” Harold said through the closed bathroom door.

When Poppy had dressed and joined her father in the lounge, he smiled at her. With no lamp on yet the room was dim.

“Come sit here, Pops,” he said.

Bella stood to leave.

“Bella, stay,” he said. She sank into the armchair Felicity usually sat in.

“Pops, Mom has gone away.”

Poppy looked at Bella, who was looking down, picking at her fingernails.

“It’s just for a bit. She needs a break,” Harold said.

Poppy suddenly felt cold as a nip of cool air came in through the open window, the curtains billowing in the breeze.

“Where?” Poppy said.

“It’s just for a while, she’ll be back soon.”

“Where is she?”

“Away. She’ll back in a bit.”

“But where is Mom staying? Where did she go?”

Harold took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He put them back on and looked at Bella.

Bella held Harold’s gaze. She offered no answer to Poppy’s questions.

Poppy looked from one to the other. “Where is Mom?”

“Durban, she’s gone to Durban,” Harold said.

Poppy saw the sharp look Bella gave their father. The floor seemed to sway, and Poppy’s stomach lurched. “She promised to take me to Durban. She said she would take me for a holiday. She went without me?”

Bella moved next to Poppy on the sofa. “She hasn’t gone for a holiday, Pops.”

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Poppy lay in bed listening to her father in the bathroom next door to her bedroom getting ready for work. The long sound of a string of urine, then the flush that set off a chain of groans and grinding in the pipes that ran through the house. He progressed from the bathroom to the bedroom. She waited for him to come into her room before he left for work. She didn't want to see his pulled-down mouth and his tilted head, mocking her. At the hard turn of the door handle Poppy closed her eyes, pretending to be asleep. She heard him walk to the window and open the curtains and then the windows. She peeped at him through narrowed eyes.

He was standing with his back to her, his hands in his pockets, looking up at the sky. He didn't speak as he usually did to force her to drop the pretence of being asleep or to wake her up if she was not pretending. There was a hint of coolness in the air that wafted through the window, but Poppy lay still, not wanting to move deeper under the covers and alert her father to the fact that she was awake.

He looked at his watch, pulled his cuffs. "I love this time of year," he said to himself and turned to Poppy. He laughed. "If you are going to pretend you are asleep then you have to breathe much slower, and not peep at me under your eyelashes."

Poppy opened her eyes, but she wasn't going to smile. Not after Bella and him and Keturia had kept her mother's leaving a secret the whole day.

"I'll be late tonight, probably back after you have gone to sleep. I have given Bella money for ice cream or cake," he said. He had no mock sad face. He seemed a bit taller.

He touched her head softly and left. Poppy lay looking at a strip of blue sky above the red wall on the other side of the yard. But its unrelenting blueness made her squint. She reached for her book, and lying beneath a tangle of sheets, blankets and the bedspread, she began the next chapter.

It was a book Poppy had lost, or so she had thought. Her mother had berated her relentlessly about the lost *Little Women.* Felicity said it had been given to her when she was a child. Months later Poppy found the book in her mother's cupboard, hidden under her clothes. She had left it there, but last night she had taken it.

She could not help it, reading until the last sentence of that chapter, and then she flung the book onto the floor after she realised when she reread the title of the chapter, "The Valley of the Shadow", that she should have known what was coming. The book had split from its spine. Poppy did not care. It was her mother's book. Tears blurred her eyes but she brushed them away and lay in a tight ball in the semi-darkness under her covers.

There was a banging in the yard and then the sound of the back door closing loudly. It must be Keturia emptying the wastepaper baskets. A hard wind had come up. Bella and Keturia were laughing, and when Poppy got out of bed to look out of her window they stood on either end of the line working their way towards each other, quickly unpegging the washing and flinging it into the basket, as sharp spits of rain hit them in the face. Poppy sat on her bed until she heard the back door slam shut. She was hungry. In the kitchen Bella was standing against the counter with a hand towel wiping the rain off her face. When Keturia came out of the scullery Bella passed a towel to her. Keturia hesitated.

"You're wet, Ketty. Dry off. I'll make tea," Bella said. When she turned towards the kettle, Poppy saw her close her eyes and clench her jaw.

The kitchen door rattled and the three of them watched as the handle repeatedly went up and down, squeaking. Keturia marched to the door and flung it open, letting in wind, a scurry of leaves and Brian.

He rushed inside, pushing the door closed and standing against it breathing hard. "It's wild out there."

He walked to the kitchen table leaving muddy footprints along the floor. His hair was slick against his forehead; water was running down his neck.

"You're making everything wet," Keturia said. She handed him a towel. "Take your shoes off."

"Don't suppose you have a spare set of clothes for me?" Brian said.

Poppy stared at him blankly.

Brian laughed. "It's a joke. I'll have some tea then. Two sugars. Any biccies?"

Poppy scowled. "I don't take orders from boys."

Bella had already taken out an extra teacup and saucer and Keturia set the jar of rusks on the table.

When he had finished, Brian asked for a second cup of tea and with it he helped himself to a third rusk. "There is a tree down in Sam Hancock. Right across the road. Nearly killed me. When I heard the crack, I thought I'd been struck by lightning. It was crashing mad loud and the wind was howling and the ground was shaking. I got a massive *skrik*. But then I

thought if I was hit by lightning, I wouldn't be able to think about being struck by lightning, 'cos my brain would be fried. So I relaxed a bit. But then I thought I'd better get here fast. It's closer than home. These are delicious."

"Where is home?" Bella said.

"Other side of Number Four," Brian said, through a mouth full of wet crumbs.

"What do you mean Number Four?"

"I mean The Fort, the prison," Brian said.

Bella watched him as she sipped her tea slowly.

"Why does your mother let you go out in such weather?"

"It was fine one minute and a raging storm the next. She's at work, anyways," Brian said.

"What work does she do?" Bella asked, sitting down at the kitchen table opposite him.

Poppy interrupted. "Let's go look at the tree. The storm has almost passed."

Bella looked at Poppy, her eyes narrowed.

The clouds sped off as quickly as they had come. Keturia told Brian to wipe the kitchen floor clean of his muddy footprints and Poppy to wash the dishes, while she and Bella rehung the laundry. The backyard was steaming in the morning sun, the rain quickly evaporating off the slasto.

"Get your bike, we can go for a ride after," Brian said.

With Brian in a pair of Poppy's socks, his wet shoes and clothes they went down the lane to Sam Hancock to inspect the fallen tree. Brian took charge of the bike, cycling ahead and then back up the lane to Poppy. The plane tree did stretch across the road, from one pavement to the opposite one, its tall branches resting in the small yard of one of the row houses. It was hard to see underneath the mass of leaves and the people hanging around whether the fence in front of the house had held up. But Brian and Poppy agreed it was probably crushed.

"I wonder if anyone is dead," Brian said.

Poppy was more interested in the broken base of the tree, which, now ripped, exposed a cavity in the earth and the root system that was still intact underground but no longer connected to the tree. They squatted close to the upturned torn bottom of the tree. The hard rain had washed off most of the soil from the swollen, crooked roots that looked like a giant hand rising from the ground. The crowd was mostly interested in discussing the possible damage to the house, which was hard to determine with the tree still obscuring it. Poppy saw

Santie and Tantie standing nearby. She nudged Brian and pointed. He waved to them. But they just stared silently at the commotion.

A man with a red face who kept tugging at his uniform, told Poppy and Brian to move back. Brian stood, but Poppy stayed mesmerised by the wide trunk that had kept the tree upright for so long, and then in one whip of wind had failed.

The chatter of opinions subsided, but Poppy only became aware of the silence and space around her when she looked up to see a line of men standing next to her. The crowd had moved back on the instructions of the red-faced man. The men all wore the same worn shirts and shorts. They looked down at their bare feet, except one man, who, standing almost next to Poppy, looked at her. His face was dented with scars. His blank eyes scared her.

A guard with pimples on his face walked up and down in front of the men slapping a baton into his left palm. Another guard nearby shifted from one leg to the next. They all waited for Red Face, who now that he had commanded silence, seemed unsure what instructions to give.

"Voetsek," the young guard shouted at Poppy. It sounded so loud in the surrounding silence. He tried to yank her up by the collar of her shirt, but she fell backwards onto the wet ground, her skirt riding up over her thighs. With mud and dirt sticking to the back of her legs, she pulled her clothes down as she stood up. Volleys of hard words were thrown between Red-Face and the guard who had pulled Poppy over. The two men stood close to each other, sending angry sounds back and forth, spit bubbling at the corner of Red Face's mouth. The only words Poppy understood were "*die wit kind"*.

Brian stepped forward and led Poppy away. They stopped on the corner of the rugby field to watch as the prisoners began chopping up the tree. The three guards stood aside, watching as they worked.

"That would have been a good opportunity to escape," Brian said.

"What?"

"The prisoners. Wait till the guards start fighting over some white kid, then make your break."

"What do you mean?" Poppy said.

"You need a diversion so that the guards are distracted, then you take the gap and run like hell."

"No, what do you mean 'white kid'."

“You.” Brian said, as he hopped on her bike and cycled slowly along Sam Hancock towards Joubert Street. “Come, let’s go. My auntie said I must get some apricots,” he called over his shoulder.

Poppy followed him, but she kept looking back at the hollow sounds of the prisoners working. They went down Joubert Street Extension to cross Empire. Brian took a gap in the traffic. Poppy hesitated.

Brian watched her from the other side of the road. “Come on, Poppy, I haven’t got all day.”

She looked left and right and left again and then ran across. Brian cycled slowly as Poppy walked behind on a shaded road on which large houses, on either side, were set back in big gardens.

“Where are we going?”

“Apricots,” Brian said.

Many gardens were overgrown, with grass that needed to be cut and shrubs trimmed. One house had a gutter hanging loose, another a gate that was missing, leaving a gap between two low stone pillars as the entrance for visitors.

“These houses look empty,” Poppy said.

“Some. Not all. I got chased by two massive, vicious dogs before Christmas when I was getting plums. They came charging round this one house. I almost got torn to pieces. I never knew I could run so fast. Every time I ate that plum jam my auntie made I thought how it nearly cost me my life.”

Poppy laughed.

“It was here,” he said.

They stopped on the pavement in front of a low wall and beyond it a long lawn, covered in leaves. A small black metal gate had a sign that said “Beware of the dog.” A tangle of shrubs obscured one corner of the house. A flycatcher flew from a tree and then swept back into the shelter of its branches. A window was open on the second floor and Poppy thought she could hear a radio.

“Who lives here?”

“Old lady. Old man. Some of them won’t move. Even though they don’t own the houses anymore or can’t afford to own them.”

“Where will they go?”

“People are always getting moved around here.”

“What do you mean?”

Brian cycled on, leaving Poppy staring up at the open window. A robin scratching through a thick layer of leaves and rotting flowers beneath a hibiscus caught Poppy's eye. When she looked back up at the window someone was staring down at her. She stepped back sharply into the road, stumbling into a pothole filled with rainwater. Poppy ran, her wet shoe slapping the road. She couldn't see Brian ahead of her. The tall thick trees on the pavement had trunks wide enough for someone to hide behind, and the damp wooded gardens created small caves of shade. Poppy slowed down, stopped. She could hear nothing. Ahead of her the road curved to the right. Where was Brian? She wanted to go back, but was this the road that led to Empire? She couldn't hear the traffic.

"Brian?" But Poppy's voice was too loud in such a quiet place and she didn't call out again. Her face prickled with sudden panic as a cat sprang onto a low boundary wall. She forced herself to walk on slowly.

Around the bend she saw her bike lying on the pavement and as she got closer Brian called to her. "You slowcoach, where've you been?"

"Where are you?'

"Here."

Poppy couldn't see him.

"Up here, Poppy."

She looked up and could see his knees between the branches of a tree. "You can't just go in there. It's someone's house."

"Here catch." Brian threw apricots to Poppy and then he jumped down into the long grass. He walked to the veranda of the house and sat on the steps. Poppy sat with him while they ate.

"Not the best," Brian said as he threw the pit into a shrub.

The front door of the house opened and a man with black hair down to his shoulders came out. He handed Brian a bag. "Return this when you bring me the jam."

Brian smiled. "Thanks, Raf."

He walked to the edge of the veranda and stood there with his back to them. Poppy watched him. He was barefoot, wearing shorts and a vest. He had a book in his hand. She looked away as he turned and settled on a worn wicker chair to read.

"Come, Poppy, I'll get the apricots and throw them down to you."

Poppy missed more apricots than she caught as Brian flung them out the tree. "Poppy, come on, they're going to bruise."

"Come down, you can catch."

Poppy climbed as high as the tree would allow, and then worked her way down, inspecting each piece of fruit before picking it.

"Why are you taking so long, Poppy?"

"I am checking if they ready to be picked."

"Just take them all."

"There's no point in picking them if they are not ready. It's a waste."

"She's right. You need to be more discerning, Brian," Raf said, looking up from his book.

"Where are the other trees?" Poppy said.

Brian bent to catch an apricot. "There's only this one."

"I bet there are other fruit trees, no one ever just plants one."

"Raf, Poppy says there are other trees."

"Around the house."

"What? You never told me," Brian said.

"You never asked. It's all about asking the right questions," Raf said, as he stretched back and closed his eyes.

Poppy perched on a low branch and then swung down and looked into the bag Brian was holding. Fifteen, maybe twenty apricots. "Let's see what the other tree has."

Raf remained still, his eyes shut. Poppy looked at his chest rise and fall and the vein in his forearm that rose through his smooth skin. They walked around the house on a barely visible path with long, thick grass on one side and layers of leaves that had gathered against the stone base of the house. Another apricot tree was in a corner. Its branches were weighed down with fruit, and they could smell the rotting apricots scattered beneath it. Tiny insects swarmed up as they stepped between the fallen fruit.

Brian couldn't see a way up. The lowest branches were well above his head. Poppy, with her shoes off, found purchase on a knob and clutching onto the trunk shimmied up.

"How did you do that?" Brian said.

Poppy didn't know. Brian tried to mimic Poppy's manoeuvre but his thin arms failed him. At the back of the house was a porch, half of which was enclosed by louvre windows. What looked like a school chair stood at the back door. Brian fetched it and set it below the tree, but fell off when one of the front legs gave way as he stood on it.

Poppy peered down at Brian lying among the stench. "Lean the chair against the trunk."

It took several attempts and the scowl on Brian's face deepened. Once he was up they perched on opposing branches eating apricots, forgetting at first to add to the bag that Poppy had hooked on small branch.

"You're big for a girl."

Poppy swallowed hard as she swung her calves back so he couldn't see their thickness. Looking at her thighs spread against the trunk made her think of her mother raising her eyebrows at her when they had visitors, a signal to Poppy that she should move forward on her seat to sit on the edge with her knees together, her back straight and her stomach in. Poppy struggled to hold the position and so failed to respond to a question put to her by a visitor, bringing a frown from her mother. She would be on the beach now. Poppy had seen photos of her taken before Bella was born. Sitting on a towel, beach sand speckling her thin calves. In one photo she was looking out at the sea, in another she had turned to the camera with a look of annoyance on her face. Poppy wondered now who had taken that photo.

Brian and Poppy barely spoke as they filled the bag with apricots. They didn't see Raf when they left, and Brian didn't think it necessary to say goodbye as Poppy suggested. Brian walked ahead as Poppy rode her bike and when they crossed over to Joubert Street Extension, he turned left into Sam Hancock. Poppy carried on up the hill.

Poppy did not have the heart to cycle up the hill. It was hot but the strip of shade cast by the Queen Vic made her shiver. She turned left into the small road to the nurses' home and her house. A group of nurses walked towards her; but in close conversation they didn't seem to see her. Halfway up the drive Poppy stopped, and then pushed her bicycle hard onto the lawn and left it there.

There was no one at home. Poppy helped herself to biscuits, which she ate with sweet tea. She wandered through the cool rooms. The lounge had been tidied of newspapers her father always left on the floor. His pipe and ashtray were clean, neatly placed on the dark wood side table next to his red tobacco tin. The cushions had been plumped. The room smelled of furniture polish.

In the kitchen a tap dripped, but Poppy didn't turn it tighter. She looked for an old copy of The Star among the newspapers stacked in the pantry, but her father had used most of them for kindling.

Little Women had been put on her bedside table, but she did not want to continue now that Beth was gone. It was unnecessary to have Beth die. Poppy took the book and left it on the small table in the passage outside her bedroom.

Poppy slid under her bed and pried open the loose section of floorboard. She took out the small box in which the ruby pendant on a thin chain was hidden. She put it on and went outside to her mother's chair in the front garden. Its legs had sunk into the soil and there were grooves in the grass where the chair had been dragged forward or back. Without a cushion it was uncomfortable, but she stayed there looking at what her mother had looked at all those hours she had sat here.

There were cigarette ends underneath the hydrangeas and she caught a brief view of a bus grinding up Joubert Street Extension. But mostly the view was of the back of the nurses' home now that most of the pine trees were gone. Why had her mother sat here so often and for so long?

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Violet sat on the back steps. The morning sun cast across her feet was already warm. She held a hot cup of tea in her hands which cooled as she waited for the sun to stretch up her legs and work its way to her knees. A small bird was in the peach tree, inspecting the pink blossoms for insects. She watched its progress, darting from branch to branch, alert, pausing between each flower to look around. Then she noticed Ma Dlamini, standing with her hand resting on the handle of spade that had been driven into the ground, looking at her. "Ma?"

"Sitting there in silence won't bring her back."

Violet had not been thinking of Beatrice, but now she did wonder where she could have gone. She had wanted to ask Ma Dlamini if she knew, but she wasn't sure how to, not after Ma Dlamini had warned her with that look when Violet first realised Beatrice was gone and a tumble of questions came from Violet's mouth. All Ma Dlamini had said as tears ran down Violet's face was: "That girl could have given me notice, now I have to find someone else — do you know anyone?" Violet had been confused at first until she followed Ma Dlamini's gaze to Beatrice's empty bed.

Now, as Ma Dlamini dwelled on the flowerbed she had dug up, Violet said: "Do you think she will come back?"

She turned to Violet, looked at her for what seemed to be a long time and then said quietly: "I hope not."

Violet was taken aback. She remembered their whispered conversations and laughing over things that were hushed up with looks between them when she walked in from outside or arrived back from work.

"Come, you can help me," Ma Dlamini said. She walked up and down the edge of the narrow L-shaped bed, with the soil dug up into clumps. At one end near the toilet wall was a rosemary bush that had come through the dry, cold winter with no obvious effects. The granadilla, twined around the fence, was already blooming, its flowers white and purple, and in the corner of the fence a gooseberry was showing strong growth in the sudden hot weather. Ma Dlamini knelt down and methodically broke the clumps of soil, stopping to look up at

Violet who was standing next to her, and indicating with her with head that Violet should help. The compacted soil was dry and broke easily in Violet's hands. They tore up the mustard plants that had been pulled out a few weeks ago and left to dry and dug the shredded plants into the bed as they moved along its length. When they finished Ma Dlamini stood silently looking down on the collection of plants, now vigorously growing beyond the confines of the tins they had been planted in and kept against the warmest side of the house during spring.

"We'll start here, it's the sunniest spot. We'll plant the vegetable seeds among the flowers. Maybe stop those *skelms* if they can't see the vegetables."

Violet dug holes to the depth Ma Dlamini instructed. She watched as Ma Dlamini carefully removed a plant from a tin, placed it gently in a hole, and then filled in the hole with soil and pressed it down hard with her hands.

"This one already has a flower."

Violet knelt down to inspect the small elongated pink petals, streaked with a dark stain. She copied Ma Dlamini when she rubbed her fingers on the leaves and then smelled her fingertips, surprised at the pungent scent.

"Once it's bigger we can do more cuttings," Ma Dlamini said.

After the pelargoniums they planted the eggplant.

She handed Violet packets of seeds. "Start with the sunflowers at the back."

She pressed the seeds Ma Dlamini passed her into shallow indents and then covered them with soil. "What are they for?" Violet asked.

"The flowers."

Ma Dlamini pushed four firm, thick sticks, which had been collected near the vlei, into the ground to mark the corners of a small square, and then tied shorter sticks to them like the rungs of a ladder. She told Violet to do the same further down the bed with the remaining sticks and when they were finished four tomato seeds were planted in the middle of each structure. The seeds of onion and carrot were interspersed among the pelargoniums, as well as gem squash, marrow, bush bean and beetroot.

"What about mielies?" Violet asked as they surveyed their work.

Ma Dlamini walked around the garden, Violet followed. The garden was a narrow strip that wrapped around the house. In the front garden was a yellow daisy bush flowering even though many of its leaves were a crisp brown that crinkled in Violet's hand. A jasmine, which was thriving in the hot, dry spring, weighed down a section of fence.

"Too big for here, the mielies," she said as they returned to the back garden, "and they mostly get taken. I can't watch them all day and night."

Ma Dlamini watered the bed and then left Violet to wash the tins so they could be reused for another batch of cuttings. She was surprised when Ma Dlamini returned with a teapot, cups and saucers and a small cake on a tray. Violet sat on the ground, and Ma Dlamini on the back steps. They drank tea that was stronger with each cup and ate the cake slice by thick slice while looking at the vegetable bed and the promise it held.

When the sun became too hot they moved inside.

"I'll bath the boys and then you can have a turn," Ma Dlamini said.

Violet nodded, looking forward to the quiet and cool of her room.

"You'll move in with me and the boys next weekend. I need to rent the room."

"Can't we share, like Beatrice and I did?"

Ma Dlamini was in her bedroom, speaking through the open door, "No, it's a man. He's paying more than you and Beatrice combined."

"Who?" Violet said, stepping into the doorway of Ma Dlamini's room.

"He's an uncle. Of my husband. Lives at the hostel now. It's crowded there. He wants space, his own room. He has a good job."

"Where?"

"Where what?"

"Where will I sleep?"

They both looked at the double bed that Ma Dlamini shared with her sons, and the wardrobe with only just enough space to walk between.

"Maybe in the lounge then, we'll see."

Violet drifted off during the boys' afternoon bath, despite their shrieks and their mother's admonishments. When she woke she lay in the dimness of her room, the smell of jasmine stronger now that night was coming.

Violet had not seen Stanley for several weeks after Beatrice left, but one Sunday afternoon he was standing at the front gate and Menzi rushed inside to say she had a visitor. They sat in the garden and then walked with Menzi and Lwazi to the store, where he bought them cold drinks. It became a regular visit, every Sunday afternoon. Ma Dlamini took to leaving him a plate from lunch that Violet heated up for him as an early supper before he left at five o'clock. They never spoke of Beatrice and he didn't say much about his work these days. He was a messenger at a law firm and had planned to resume studying, which he had dropped a

few years before when he couldn't pay the tuition. But it was more difficult now that he couldn't continue at Wits. It was the only time Violet heard bitterness creep into his voice, when he spoke of his wish to be a lawyer. But he seldom mentioned it. He brought magazines and occasionally books for Violet. The books she seldom had time to read, and if she hadn't got past the first few pages by his next visit she returned it. He laughed as he took the book, sometimes saying that this one had bored him as well. The magazines she did read. Sometimes Stanley elaborated on an article in Drum that he thought Violet didn't understand, until he noticed that she had stopped listening and he then chuckled at himself and said: "Oh, you already knew that."

When Violet did not have to watch Lwazi and Menzi, they went to Sindi's**.** She knew many of the patrons, but never saw the thin-lipped woman, or Jack, the man who had escorted them home on the first night she had gone there with Beatrice. She nursed one beer all afternoon, avoiding the small clusters of people who Stanley often sat with talking in low voices, and instead spent those afternoons with Dora, the woman who had worn a butter-yellow dress the night Violet first met her. She was frivolous and generous, and Violet loved her company.

As they walked home, Stanley said: "Her parents indulge her."

"Who?"

"Dora."

Violet said nothing, she wanted to enjoy the last hour of her Sunday afternoon.

But Stanley wouldn't let up. "Her father's a headmaster, her mother a teacher, but Dora is an actress."

"And that is not suitable for a young woman?"

"Well, she can't make much money being in the occasional play. And she must spend what she earns on all those clothes."

"What's it to you, if Dora spends all her money on clothes?"

"It's irresponsible. She should be saving for when she has a family."

"What if she doesn't want a family?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Oh, I think she does."

Menzi came running up to them as they approached the house along the dusty road. Holding the little boy's hand, she turned to Stanley and said goodbye, not inviting him in this time for his early supper. He didn't seem disappointed. As she watched him walk away she realised he knew Dora a lot better than she had thought.

Violet still saw Stanley most Sundays and they continued to argue about articles they had read. Violet still kept newspaper clippings she thought he would enjoy. He did the same for her. They walked in the neighbourhood and visited Sindi's but she no longer wondered if he could be a husband and Ma Dlamini stopped asking after him each time she returned home on a Sunday evening.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Violet moved her belongings into Ma Dlamini's room, into a single drawer cleared for her. Her dresses were on a hanger hung on a hook on the wall. The wardrobe had been moved, creating just enough space on the concrete floor next to the bed for the thin mattress. But the arrangement was so uncomfortable for Ma Dlamini that after a few nights she relinquished the living room to Violet, where she slept on a mattress on the floor that had to be rolled up and, with her blankets, stored behind the sofa during the day. Her clothes remained in her suitcase, and each night she had to remove a picture off the wall to hang her clothes on the hook for the following day.

The bedroom she had shared with Beatrice was now occupied by Jonas, a large man who made his presence felt. It wasn't just the extra laundry, which he handed to Violet on Sunday mornings or that he expected her to fill his enamel basin with fresh water each evening for him to use in the morning. At meals, where he ate more than anyone, he sat with his legs opened wide or with his elbows resting on the table so there wasn't enough space for them to eat together. At one meal his foot perpetually touched Violet's under the table, and each time she moved her foot away he found it. She feigned illness to cut her meal short. And he was always berating Menzi and Lwazi. She watched Ma Dlamini as he harangued the two little boys, their eyes wide as he leaned towards them, at times wagging his finger at them; they struggled to eat as their many faults were listed. They looked towards their mother and so did Violet, expecting her to intervene on their behalf. She didn't.

It was when Jonas had retired to his room on a Sunday morning, his radio playing too loudly, and Menzi and Lwazi were outside hanging up the laundry, that Violet, finishing her chores, found Ma Dlamini sitting at the kitchen table. She had a small notebook, in which she kept a record of the prices of baking goods and her grocery lists. Violet made a pot of tea, and joined her at the kitchen table to drink a cup herself. They sat in silence for a while, until Ma Dlamini said she needed to rest and could Violet watch the boys. But she didn't move, as if the effort of rising from the table was beyond her.

She had lost weight, which Violet had thought was due to Jonas's vast consumption of food, leaving less for the four of them. "Have you eaten, Ma? I can make you something."

She shook her head. “Not now, I can’t eat.”

“It will get better, Ma.” But Violet’s voice trailed off, she didn’t believe it herself.

“I need to find Victor.”

Violet had no idea who Victor was.

“Victor Dlamini, the bastard I married. Am still married to.”

“Why, Ma? Where is he?”

“That’s the problem. I don’t know. But if I don’t find him I can’t renew the housing permit. And then where we will go?”

“Is there no other way to get the permit?”

Ma Dlamini looked at her. “I am working on it.” She finished her tea and poured herself another cup. Then she showed Violet the sum at the back of the book. “Twelve weeks, if we can just manage for twelve weeks, I will have enough. And then he will be gone.”

It was Jonas’s weekly rental, more than Violet paid, and accumulated over twelve weeks it would be enough, it seemed, for Ma Dlamini to secure the permit. Violet was not sure how.

From then Jonas was served at the table by Violet and left to eat alone; the boys and Ma Dlamini ate before he returned from work. A plate was left for Violet. It was cold by the time she could sit down in the living room to eat it, but it was a pleasure to have her dinner in peace. She had her own radio now, and in the evenings while listening, she read sections of the paper brought home some days from the shop, once Mrs Tilly had done the crossword puzzle.

At the weekends, Jonas went out after his lunch, only returning late in the evening when they were asleep. Then the four of them ate a meal together. Violet felt less lonely now, and she realised it was because Beatrice was gone.

Violet always pushed a heavy armchair against the lounge door before she went to sleep. But one Saturday night Jonas managed to push the door open and Violet only woke when he was already stumbling around in the dark, reeking of alcohol. She hit him with the hook of a wire hanger, and he called out in the dark asking who was in his room, who was there and why. She hit him again and then listened as he crawled out the doorway.

Menzi and Lwazi found him fast asleep on the kitchen floor the next morning. They woke Violet to show her the large prostrate man snoring heavily. She woke him before Ma Dlamini came through and while she poured his tea, Jonas, sitting at the table, touched the

nick on his cheek, dislodging the scab. Violet watched him inspect the blood on his fingertip, showing no recollection of what the source of the cut could be.

The front door opened straight into the lounge, but now that it was also Violet's bedroom they had begun using the kitchen door at the back of the house when arriving home or leaving. But when Violet arrived home one Wednesday evening she found the front door open. Ma Dlamini stood in the lounge with a girl. She gave a small nod in response to Violet's greeting, and then her eyes quickly reverted to Ma Dlamini. It was only then that Violet noticed the small school suitcase standing upright next to her, the new shoes and the skirt that looked too big.

"You two will have to close off the front door properly, move the cabinet in front of it. Then we can fit one bed in here. Rose, you will sleep on the floor.''

The young woman nodded.

"Violet. Make tea."

"Yes, Ma."

Rose stood in the doorway to the kitchen, her shoulders slumped and shifting from foot to foot, until a sharp look from Ma Dlamini made her stand still and upright. Violet put the teapot on the table. Ma Dlamini told them to sit. They talked about Rose's family, and where she would be working, until Menzi and Lwazi came through the back door bringing in dirt and dust and Ma Dlamini yelled at them from where she was sitting at the table to fetch the dustpan and clean, startling Rose. When they were done, Menzi stood next to Violet, leaning into her while he explained to her the collection of small stones he took from his pocket. He gave her one stone to keep, and then asked for it back saying he would give it to Violet tomorrow. Lwazi drank his tea in silence, staring at Rose unflinchingly.

"Come Menzi, leave Violet, she needs to cook. Rose, you will help her."

Menzi held up a hand so his fingertips touched Violet's raised hand, and then he followed his mother into the bedroom.

"What should I do?" Rose asked.

Violet smiled at her. "Finish your tea." She got up and cut two thick slices of bread on which she spread jam, putting it in front of Rose. "Eat this, I'll cook. Let me get it started and then we can sort out the room. You need to sleep."

Rose's chin dimpled as she tried to suppress her tears, but they still came slipping down her cheeks.

Violet showed Rose how to get to the store in town where she was going to be working, and leaving her there she walked quickly up the hill alongside the vast vacant plots where they said a new civic centre was to be built on the top of the hill. She turned right into Kotze Street, past the women's prison and next to it Number Four. It was the first time she had seen the massive doors open. A police van drove through the open doorway it into a dim, deep tunnel. A guard hurried to close the doors behind the van, but the door caught on something and while he was trying to close it, another door at the far end of the tunnel opened, letting light shine through the dark space. The guard struggling with the street door yelled something back into the tunnel, but his words were lost in the commotion. The back of the van was open and two men climbed out and dashed into the street. One ran straight across the road towards Violet, looking at her with wide, frightened eyes. Some one pulled Violet hard and she tried to yank her arm free.

"Stop it, let's get out of here," a man said to her.

"Leave me alone," she said, as his hard grip bit into her upper arm.

She looked at the man holding her. It was Enoch. When she looked back at the road, the man with the frightened eyes was lying on the street, a pool of blood forming next to him. His legs were under a bus, which had stopped in the middle of the road. Cars behind the bus were hooting, and a man got out of his car and marched over to the bus driver shouting at him to move the bus along. But the bus driver didn't respond as he stood shaking next to the man lying still on the street.

"Is he dead?" Violet asked.

"Hopefully," Enoch said.

"What do you mean?"

"He'd probably die anyway in Number Four, it just would've taken longer."

They stopped outside the shop. Violet's hands were trembling, Enoch took them together into his and held them firm. "Breathe, slowly, look at me, breathe slowly," he said.

"Violet, you are late. Stop talking to your boyfriend," Mrs Tilly said, wagging her finger at them.

Neither responded but Enoch let her hands go and Violet turned to walk into the shop.

"I hope you are not going to be sulky today with me, girlie," Mrs Tilly said as Violet walked past her to the kitchen.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

At morning assembly Mr Higgins told each child to bring an extra bottle of water to school. Standing at the podium on the stage, he read from a newspaper article that said it was the driest October yet recorded for Johannesburg. Workmen had been busy in the last week installing ceiling fans or unjamming windows that had never been opened since the beginning of the school year. Even at this early hour Mr Higgins was mopping his brow with a handkerchief. In class Mrs Pleasant lost her officiousness; in the heat, sitting at her desk she flapped a piece of paper in her face, the fan ticking overhead making no difference to the heavy, hot air. Poppy had to keep wiping her hand on her school dress as the pencil kept slipping out from between her wet fingers. Jane complained of a headache and was sent to the sickroom. She was followed by three others, and when Tommaso stood to ask to get more water Mrs Pleasant let them all out onto the playground to wait for the final bell of the day.

Poppy found Brian deep in the shade of the trees in a corner of the playground. There were large logs they had found there, which they had positioned as seats, but it was cooler in a shallow dip in the sand Poppy had dug with her hands, where she now sat and read.

"Noughts and crosses?" Brian asked. He had drawn a grid in the sand.

Poppy shook her head.

"What you reading?"

She showed him the spine of the book.

He tilted his head to read. "*Black Beauty*?"

Poppy carried on reading.

"What's it about?"

"A horse," she said, not looking up from the book.

"A horse?"

Poppy looked at him.

"Is it good?"

Poppy nodded. She returned to the book, but could not concentrate with Brian fidgeting next to her and working up to another question. "I have something for you." She leaned forward and dragged her school bag across the sandy ground towards her. "Here."

Brian read the title. "*Unusual Things for Lively Youngsters*." He opened it; on the inside of the front cover was an inscription. "For Alba. On your tenth birthday. 9 November, 1951." He flipped through the pages. "Who's Alba?''

"My cousin."

"1951, she must be ancient now."

"She's not."

Hearing the offence in her voice, Brian said: "I just meant that it's a long time ago."

"She's dead."

"What happened?"

"You can keep it for a bit. But I will need it back, she gave it to me the day before she died. She was seventeen."

"I don't think I will take it. But thanks."

Poppy laughed. "It's not cursed. I have had it since then and I didn't die."

Brian shrugged.

Poppy paged through the book. "Look at this bit — you will like this. Bloodsuckers."

Brian took the book. He read out bits to Poppy. There was a bit about a jellyfish and the stinging cells on its tentacles.

"There are jellyfish in the sea at Durban. Have you been there?"

Brian shook his head.

"We're going to Durban. For a holiday."

"When?"

Poppy didn't answer.

The bell rang for the end of the school day but they remained in the shade paging through the book until the caretaker, wanting to lock up and start his weekend early, told them them to scat.

"Let's go to Raf's. I have a surprise," Brain said.

Brian opened Raf's front garden gate, walked across the patchy lawn up onto the veranda and turned to Poppy, who was waiting at the gate. "Come on."

"You look like you own the place," Poppy said, as she reached the house. They dropped their school bags on the veranda. The front door was closed, a limp curtain hung, half-open, at one window. Poppy peered in. "Shouldn't we knock?"

Brian jumped down the steps in one leap. "I want to show you something."

She followed him around the house to the back. At the bottom of the garden, down three wide stone steps and behind an untrimmed hedge, was a swimming pool. It was empty. A thick layer of rotted leaves had gathered in the deep end. They walked around the edge, paved with cracked slasto and dirty white chipped trim. Brian climbed down the metal steps attached to the side of the pool, jumping from the lowest rung onto the floor of the pool. He landed hard, falling on his knees. He sat on the bottom of the pool inspecting the blood rising through a graze. Poppy followed, judging the big jump down from the bottom rung better than Brian.

They walked towards the deep end, stopping at the edge of the sludge. Looking up, Poppy could see the sky and the tops of the trees. A thrush digging with its beak in the soggy mess startled them. It flew off with a worm in its beak.

"We can fill it up," Brian said.

"With what?"

"There's a hose pipe round the side of the house, must be a tap somewhere round here."

"We'll have to clean this up first," Poppy said.

Brian threw a stone into the wet mass, a putrid smell rose up. "*Eina*," Brian slapped at his ankles as mosquitoes swarmed up from the dank sludge.

Poppy ran back towards the shallow end, swatting at the swarming midges around her. But at that end of the pool it was not that shallow and she couldn't reach the metal steps. Brian was behind her. They looked at each other alarmed and then laughed, high-pitched and nervous.

"I am smaller than you, give me a leg up," Brian said.

Poppy interlaced her fingers for Brian step on, but even then he could not reach the bottom rung of the steps.

They shouted. But when they stopped to listen for a response it seemed to be entirely quiet, not even distant traffic or a bird calling.

"Do you think Raf is here?" Poppy asked.

"Maybe, but if he is, he doesn't know we're here." Brian walked back towards the deep end. He pulled a long thin branch from the sludge and prodded the wet leaves.

"What are we looking for?"

"I am thinking."

"Take your shoes off. We can try again."

Brian managed to grab the bottom rung of the metal step ladder pinned to the edge of the pool, but he couldn't haul himself up.

"Let me try, I am stronger," Poppy said.

Brian bent over near the side of the pool, and clambering on his back Poppy managed to grasp the metal steps that were now hanging lopsided, with only one side still attached to the rim of the pool and quickly pulled herself up over the edge. She lay panting on the hot slasto.

"Hey, I'm still down here," Brian shouted.

When she stood, her thighs were patched red where the hot paving had burned her. She looked down at Brian, who from that angle looked smaller than usual. She walked around the pool's edge. "They will find you one day, or your skeleton rather, and this house will be forever haunted by the cries of a small boy. People will think you drowned, but you starved to death, your bones picked cleaned by birds."

Brian laughed. "No, I won't haunt this house. I will follow wherever you go and when you think you are safe I will be there whispering in your ear until you are driven mad."

"I am coming back, wait," Poppy said as she ran off.

"Sure, where do you think I'm going?"

Poppy went around the front of the house. There was no answer when she knocked on the door. She walked down the veranda steps into the front garden and looked up at the second-floor windows. One window was open, with a curtain pulled part-way across — it billowed. "Hello?"

She waited, but there was no answer. It was the breeze, which she saw ruffle the trees, that must have moved the curtain. At the small porch at the back of the house Poppy found the back door unlocked. She walked through the kitchen into a long passage with a series of doors leading off it. At the end she could see pale light behind the frosted glass of the front door. From one doorway leading into a room a rectangle of afternoon sun shone onto the wide passage floor and a section of passage wall, picking up dust balls that had collected near the skirting boards. Her footsteps on the wooden floorboards were loud as she walked along peering into the rooms. Most had no furniture. In the lounge was a sagging couch, an armchair and a coffee table with newspapers and books scattered on it. There was a strong smell of cigarette smoke. Poppy froze at sounds above her. She looked up at the high patterned ceilings. Trying not to breathe, she listened. It could be footsteps. She crept back down the passage and then ran through the kitchen and out of the house to the back garden.

Poppy found a ladder lying on its side on the other side of the house, where the privet hedge that grew along the perimeter of the property had grown so vigorously it was brushing up against a window of the house. She hauled the long ladder down to the pool and lowered it in, holding it steady while Brian climbed up.

"Well, let's never do that again," Brian said as he flopped down on the grass.

It was only then that Poppy saw the streaks on Brian's face, tears that had dried in the dirt on his face. "I would never have left you, Brian."

He nodded but when he tried to speak his voice was thick and they fell silent watching an ant making its way through the dry grass.

They came back to the house early the next morning, waking Raf up. He walked down to the pool with them listening to Brian's proposal.

"Can we do it? Fill it up?" Brian asked.

Poppy watched Raf as strolled in his slow, lanky way around the perimeter of the pool, eventually nodding. He helped them by digging out the muck, filling buckets with it which they hauled out of the pool. It took the whole day. On the Sunday Poppy and Brian ran the hose into the pool and sat on the edge with their legs hanging over, watching the water slowly fill it up.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

Poppy's father had left just after lunch, as he did every Saturday afternoon, with a grim face, his mouth set in a firm line. Today, he had ruffled her hair and said he would bring cream buns when he came home. Poppy watched him leave from the veranda. He sat in the car for a long time before he started the engine and reversed down the drive and drove away.

Bella didn't respond when Poppy asked her why she refused to speak to their father at lunch. You won't understand, was all she said, before storming out of the kitchen, thumping up the passage and slamming her bedroom door. Leaving Bella to stew, as her mother often said, Poppy cleared the table and washed the dishes. She left them to drip-dry on the rack next to the sink now that her mother wasn't there to insist they be dried with a cloth and packed away. She switched on the radio, turning it up loud, while she swept the floor, taking her time to do it properly so she didn't have to do it again later.

The raised volume of the radio had not brought Bella out of her room to insist it be turned down, so Poppy switched it off and put the kettle on. She made a pot of tea and poured a cup for her sister, but when she knocked on Bella's bedroom door there was no answer. The room was empty when Poppy opened the door a few inches to peep in. The bed was unmade and dresses were strewn across it. She left the cup of tea on Bella's dressing table, which was marked with smudges of make-up.

In the yard Poppy stood still, listening. The door to Keturia's room was closed and the windows shut. But Keturia always kept the windows closed, Poppy thought, insisting, even as each day was hotter than the one before, that the windows of the house remain shut to keep out the dust. Poppy stood right outside Keturia's room, looking down at the rotting wood at the base of her door. She couldn't hear a sound from inside.

From the highest point Poppy could climb to in the Belhambra tree, before the branches began to bend under her, she could see up the lane where people emerged from the shadows cast by the high walls of the prisons. It looked like they were walking out of a tunnel, when they suddenly emerged from the darkness into the sunlight. Today, though, pale grey clouds hung low, and the sunlight above the clouds cast a drab light over the garden.

Tucked behind thick foliage, Poppy waited. She kept a penknife in the tree, in a small box she had wedged into a hollow where several branches began. Into the trunk, she had carved their names; Harold Reginald Dickenson, Felicity Anne Dickenson, Isabella Grace Dickenson, and so far just Poppy D. The rest of her surname still had to be inscribed. Beneath each name was the date of birth followed by a dash, like she had seen in her history book, except where the death was recorded as well. She considered adding a second name for herself.

A sudden gust of wind lifted the dust on the roof of their house into waves of fine particles that then settled elsewhere when the wind dropped. The dust caught in her throat, and her cough startled two doves that had been pecking in the patchy lawn; she heard the hard flap of their wings as they flew away from the quiet garden.

The shrill sound of a bell's incessant ring, caught Poppy's attention. She looked up the lane and across the rugby field to Sam Hancock Street, but couldn't see the ice cream seller. The shrill sound became louder. He had come up Joubert Street Extension, turning off it into the short road that led to the nurses' home and their house. He continued ringing his bell to attract the off-duty nurses.

With a few coins in her sweaty hand, Poppy hung back on the edges of a group of women who had come out of the hostel to buy ice cream. When they walked off in twos and threes peeling the paper off their ice lollies, Poppy stepped forward to peer into the large tub attached to the back of the ice cream seller's bicycle. Beneath the swirls of cold air rising from the dry ice were ice lollies — green, orange and red ones — packed tight.

The ice cream seller took her money. "You don't have enough."

Poppy stepped back.

"I can pay," a young woman said. "How much extra do you need?"

"No, it's fine, thank you," Poppy said.

"No really, I have extra. Come choose. It's such a hot day."

Poppy stepped forward again and took a red lolly, then put it back for an orange one.

The ice cream vendor was impatient to get on.

"Take your time, I can also never decide," the young woman said.

Poppy made her choice. "Thank you, I will get the money from my dad later to pay you back."

"Don't worry about that. It's a treat from me to you. I've seen you around, you live in that house there."

Poppy nodded as they both looked at the closed-up house. The curtains hadn't been opened in the lounge and weeds had sprung up by the driveway gate.

She smiled. "Well, enjoy your ice cream."

Poppy watched her walk off until she felt stickiness on her palm as the ice cream began to melt. She crossed the lawn and sat at the base of the Belhambra tree in the dirt between two raised roots with her back against the wide trunk. Scout lay next to her panting in the heat as she ate her ice cream and tried to stop the sudden, surprising tears from sliding down her cheeks.

It was getting late and neither Bella nor her father had returned. A green light tinged with yellow cast a strange aura over the garden and house. The garden seemed to glow. Then, as the light began to fade birds began to call. The birds' strong clear calls in the darkening garden and rustles in the undergrowth of the shrubbery along the fence were so loud when everything else seemed so still.

In the house, with the sun having dipped below the hill, the rooms were dim, the passage where Poppy stood was almost dark. She could hear the tick-tick of the grandfather clock and the hum of the refrigerator. A tap was dripping. Beyond those noises, the silence became a hum in her ears. She walked to the window in the lounge and opened the curtains. Dark shapes in the flowerbed, which Poppy could now not decipher in the darkness, seemed to be moving. A creak of the floorboards beneath her feet startled her.

Poppy took a long drink of icy water from the glass jug in the fridge, and as she sat at the kitchen table she watched moisture condense and slide down the jug, pooling onto the table.

Her red rubber boots stood just inside the kitchen door. She put them on, closed the back door behind her and with her head down she walked fast up the lane towards Kotze Street. The incline of the lane became steeper as Poppy reached the point where two high walls rose up on either side of the lane, the wall on her left bordered the men's prison and on her right was the wall of the women's prison. In the darkness Poppy couldn't see the end of the lane where it reached Kotze Street. She hesitated, and looked back down the hill towards her home. There was a man in the shadows, watching her. She counted to three and on four she broke into a run. He was behind her, running as well. She looked back once, as she came out of the tunnel onto Kotze Street, but in the brief glance behind her she couldn't see anyone. She only stopped running when she was well past the giant's door and the little

goblins' houses sitting atop the hill. Had the man tried to grab her as she ran or had it been the goblins, scrambling down the grassy hill to the pavement?

Along Kotze, the shops were closed. But there were people about, a couple hand in hand sharing a cigarette, three young men, one with long hair that Poppy, walking behind him, thought was Raf, but realised it wasn't when he and his friends stopped to talk to two women wearing short dresses and high heels.

Poppy weaved her way around them and walked on. At the end of the second block she turned left and then left again at the next corner. She made a right turn, then another left. She walked fast, wondering how long it would take her to get lost. But when she stopped, she knew where she was.

She had followed Brian home. The first few times, she had lost him almost as soon as he turned into Goldreich Street. But once she had followed him all the way to a building that he went into. She had waited for a gap in the traffic to cross the street and once in the cool lobby of his building she had stood looking at the numbered postboxes, realising she couldn't knock on every door.

Now she looked up at the building with lights shining from its many windows, some with their curtains still open. She crossed the road and looked into the lobby. She walked a few paces away and stopped, then returned and opened the frosted glass doors into the brightly lit entrance. As she walked up a winding staircase, she heard the lift grinding in its shaft and then the rattle of the grille as it was opened. She took two steps at a time, stopping when she was out of view of whoever was coming down in the lift. It was Brian. She heard his voice in the lobby below and she crept down a few steps until she could see him. He was with a woman, who stood talking to him. She held his hands and looked into his face. Poppy thought he was crying. She heard him say: "Mama, I want to come home. Mama, please." The woman spoke softly to him, stroking his head, but with her back to Poppy she could not see her face or hear her words. She began to leave, walking towards the front door. Brian called her. "Mama, don't leave me." She turned around back towards him. Poppy watched them hug, Brian enclosed in the strong brown arms of his mother.

Poppy was not sure what was said between Brian and his mother after that. She sat on a step of the long staircase that wound up above her. She hugged herself, closed her eyes. She didn't think her mother's arms were that strong. She didn't know, though, although she did know that her mother could no longer hold a paintbrush firmly or lift a glass without trembling. Even Selma had only held her briefly before letting go.

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At the top of of the hill where Joubert Street Extension became just Joubert Street, a large area on the west side of the hill had been almost entirely cleared of houses and modest two-storey blocks of flats. Poppy had been warned by her father to stay away from the vacant site. It was dangerous, he said. When she asked why, he told her there was probably still building rubble from the demolition and there would be broken glass. But Bella told her people went there to smoke and drink, and the empty bottles were more likely the source of the broken glass than the window panes that had shattered when the houses came down.

Poppy was ahead, her strong legs pushing the pedals hard as she rode up the hill through the vast vacant site, along the road that she and Brian called the centre line. The centre line was a road that ran through the middle of the site from Hoofd Street at the top of the hill to De Korte Street at the bottom; it was crossed by three roads that cars still used as a short cut to get to and from Braamfontein and Hospital Hill. Brian was behind her, complaining of the steep incline. Poppy loved the burn in her thighs. She stopped when she reached the top, pleased that she had made it all the way without having to stop for cars crossing the centre line. There were no stops signs on the roads that criss-crossed the site and it was even more thrilling to cycle down the hill.

With most of the houses gone, their bricks, roof tiles and water pipes carted away, what was left were large grassy plots, some still populated with the trees that had once shaded gardens. A man, who had come out of a building on one corner, told them to move along. This was council property now, he said.

Builders were due to move in soon to start construction of the new city council offices. Poppy's dad had talked about it, where he would be working right on top of the hill in a big new building. Her mother had said it was unlikely he would still be employed by the council when the building was finished. Poppy wanted to know why her father might lose his job. Her father didn't respond, but her mother said: "Well, he's as English as they come, can't speak a word of Afrikaans and has never even tried."

Poppy and Brian waved at the man who had been stationed in one of only three buildings remaining at the site to ward off people. They carried on to where they thought he could not see them. They weren't the only trespassers. A group of women were sitting in the shade under trees chatting, and two teenagers were scrounging for any remnants of the homes that had been demolished.

Poppy had once found a pillbox, with a pattern engraved in the lid, small enough to hold in one hand. She still had it. There had been the odd spade or pitchfork and hose pipes, and a swing strung from a tree branch that Poppy and Brian used to play on until the rope gave way one day. Now it was mostly long grass, especially since it had been raining every late afternoon for weeks, and they had stopped looking for things. What the residents of these homes hadn't taken, others had been happy to take for them, once they had left.

Poppy and Brian now flew down the centre line, not stopping to check for cars, and each time they safely crossed a road, they whooped with delight. They pushed their bikes back up the hill, and stopped halfway to sit in a gazebo that was still standing in what was once one of the gardens. The shape of the garden was still there; a line of trees and a long driveway intersecting an expanse of weedy grass. The gazebo's benches were still intact, the wooden slats scratched now with the names of those who had been there. They read the inscriptions to each other. In a badly drawn heart one said "Catherine loves John", another message said "Lynne and Ian Forever.

"I'm going home," Brian said.

"OK, see you tomorrow."

"No, I'm going home to my mom. She's coming to fetch me tomorrow."

Poppy felt as if she was sinking. Her voice caught as she spoke. "Oh. When will you be back?"

"I'm not coming back."

"Why not? What about school?"

"There's a school near my house."

"Why did you come here then?"

"My mom wanted me to live with her sister, my aunt, go to school here."

"Why?"

Brian shrugged.

"Where's home? Maybe I can come visit sometime?"

"Western..." But Brian's voice trailed off.

"Where?"

"It's pretty far away. You won't know it."

Brian took the two steps from the gazebo and picked his bicycle up off the grass. "Bye, Poppy."

Poppy wouldn't watch him cycle away, and when she eventually did look in that direction he was gone.

She got on her bike, stopping at the corner where Joubert Street Extension dropped steeply to Empire Road. She looked up at the grumbling sky and the dark clouds heading towards her. Them she stepped on her pedals, balanced for a few seconds and flew down Hospital Hill, racing to beat the rain.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

It was already warm, even at this early hour of the day, but the air still had a freshness that Violet knew would be gone in an hour now that summer was bearing down on the city. She had left an hour earlier and had made good time, with the buses on schedule and despite the many people already heading to work. Enoch had said he would come through with the delivery at eleven and would meet Violet and Eliza for a walk afterwards.

Halfway up Hospital Street, Violet stopped to take off her cardigan. Looking up at a block of flats, she saw a white woman leaning on the balustrade of a balcony, looking down at her. The woman waved. Violet waved back, smiling at the woman's odd energetic gesture. There were fewer people than usual making their way up Hospital Street. A bus was idling in the road, waiting to take on passengers, and as she passed it she saw further up the pavement three policemen ahead. She hesitated, but walked past them, purposefully looking ahead, and then stepped off the kerb to cross the road.

She heard someone shout behind her. "*Hey, meisie, kom hier*."
She didn't look around, not until the shouting became more insistent. A young policeman gestured to her. She walked back down the hill, stopping in front of him.

He held out his hand. "Pass."

Violet could smell the sweat on his body, saw the red rash of pimples on his cheeks.

"*Pas*," he shouted at her.
She put her hand in her brassiere. The pass wasn't there. She tried the other side. He looked away as she felt around her breasts. She had put the pass in her bra this morning. She did that every day, and before she left the house, she had checked again that it was securely tucked away. She looked in her handbag, but there was only her comb, bus ticket, a small tube of lotion and wrapped in a napkin three vetkoeks to share with Enoch and Eliza at lunch. Her throat constricted and she looked up at him in alarm. She did not have the pass.

The policeman gestured with his head that she should stand aside with three men, one of whom was shifting from foot to foot.

"It's at home. I can go fetch it and bring it here," Violet said to the policeman.

He turned away to continue inspecting pass books he demanded from the few other people who had walked up the hill.

"I work just around the corner. I can ask my madam to come here and tell you I have the pass. She knows." She hated the pleading in her voice. Violet wasn't sure the policeman had heard her. She looked to the men she was standing with. One man, bent with age, shook his head at her. She took it as a warning to be quiet.

Violet wondered if she could run to the shop. Would Jilly be there? If she was, could she help? An older policeman shouted orders to the younger two and sometimes at those who were waiting to have their passes inspected. He sat on a bus stop bench, with his hands resting on his large belly. She began to move towards him, to speak to him, but when he turned and caught her eye, he winked and then ran his tongue over his upper lip. Violet looked away, shaking.

They waited as the policemen talked among themselves and shared a cigarette. Violet was one of six women. The others were men. She looked for anyone she knew, anyone who could help her. Once the cigarette was finished, the policeman with the pimples dropped the butt onto the pavement and ground it out under his shoe. The large one rose and stood in front of them. A younger policeman said: "*Sestien*."

They were told to walk up the hill in twos, and those who didn't stick to the formation were prodded with a baton. As they reached Kotze Street, Violet looked to her right towards the shop on the next block. But she couldn't see if it was open, and even if it was no one could see her. A policeman prodded her painfully in the lower back and told her to keep moving.

They crossed Kotze Street and entered the tunnel, stopping before the tall wooden double doors set deep into the side of the hill. The fat policeman, who had been walking behind them, pushed past them and banged on it. They waited. Violet felt ice cold. She had seen the giant doors many times from the other side of the road when she had walked past, now she was so close to them she could see the iron studs around each panel, the wood faded in some places, the iron casings at the base.

He banged on it again. Then he walked back towards the road and looked up towards the top of the hill above it. He shouted to someone. A guard opened a smaller door set into one of the large doors. He nodded at the fat policeman, stepped back in and began to open the bigger doors, revealing a deep, dark, wide tunnel. Violet's knees gave way. She stumbled; someone grabbed her arm, holding her up.

A woman behind her spoke to her in a low, sharp hiss. “Don’t show them you are scared. You will make it worse for us.”

Violet walked into the tunnel along with those ahead of her but was pushed back by a baton pressed hard against her breasts. The doors were slammed shut and the women and the policemen walked on, passing close to the high rampart and then over the lane that led down to the house where her mother worked.

The fat policeman rattled the gate in a high wire fence a few metres in front of a tall red-brick building. He waited, rattled it again and shouted. The front door of the building opened and women shouted back at him. Violet couldn’t make out what they were saying. The policeman swore, then shouted at them to carry on around to the back of the building. There, at a large gate set into a wall others stood in twos, and from a police van women were climbing out the back. Violet looked up at the wall, so high that as her eyes scanned it height her head swam and she felt for a moment as if she was falling backwards.

There were more policemen standing about chatting to each other. Violet watched one slap another on the back as they shared a joke, a third interrupted them and pointed to where the fat one stood. Violet looked too. He was talking to a woman in a uniform. It was a light brown skirt with a matching jacket. Violet had seen her come out of the gate with a scowl on her face. But now she was looking up at the fat one, smiling as he leaned towards her.

Violet felt a tug at her handbag and when she looked down at it, someone had opened it and had slipped their hand inside. She swung around. The two women behind her stared blankly ahead. She checked her handbag to see if anything was missing, but she couldn’t be sure. Her mind was a frenzy of panic, and she clutched her bag in front of her as she tried to remain still.

The heat and a strong smell made Violet gag as she entered the cell. The gate clanged hard behind her as the warder yanked it shut before scraping the key in the lock. She stood to one side as the other women she had been arrested with found spaces to settle down. She tried to control the shaking of her body by holding her bedding tighter. Her bowels clenched painfully and then loosened. She breathed slowly, trying to control her nausea.

A dim light was cast through small windows set high up in the walls of the cell, enough light for Violet to see many women. Some gathered in groups talking, one woman lay with her arm flung over her face. A woman with a thick scar running from one corner of her mouth to her jawline walked up to Violet and indicated she should hand over her blankets.

The woman smelled them, dropped one at Violet's feet and walked off with the other one. When Violet picked it up she felt the greasiness on the weave.

Two of the women who had been arrested with Violet seemed to know people in the cell, and she found a space near them and sat down on her rolled up bedding. The glass in the high windows was ribbed, distorting any view beyond it. They were hinged at the base and only opened an inch or two. All she could see through the side of one window was a narrow triangle of pale blue sky. She closed her eyes, focusing on the talking around her, and when the panic flared up again she slowed her breathing, counting breaths in and counting breaths out.

Violet was suddenly aware that the cell had become quiet, just the shuffle of everyone standing with their arms behind their backs and heads down. She did the same, looking at her bare feet and the unclad feet around her. She could hear a squeak, a squelch, a squeak, a squelch. The sound came closer. It stopped, then started again. She glanced to the side, but with her head down she could only see the feet and legs of other prisoners. The squelch stopped. There was a silence and then it began again. Violet noticed those next to her stiffening as the sound came closer. Two polished brown lace-up shoes stopped in front of her. The white legs coming out of them were thick at the ankles. Violet's breathing became shallow as she tried to remain still, but the more she tried to control her breath, the more ragged it became. She began to feel light-headed. The shoes and legs turned and walked on; she could see now one leg was shorter than the other. The squelch receded as the white wardress and two black wardresses behind her walked the length of the cell and then turned and walked back, leaving with a hard clang of the iron gate.

Violet sat against the wall, her one blanket beneath her, watching what she could still see in the cell as the light faded. She closed her eyes, focusing on pushing back the sobs rising from her chest. Her mother was just a few paces away. How far was it? Forty, a hundred footsteps down the hill to the small gate that opened into the backyard where her mother was probably still working, cleaning the kitchen before shutting the back door and walking across the yard to her room. She wouldn't know. How would her mother know where she was?

At a baby's wail Violet opened her eyes. The child's mother was rocking her, too tired, it seemed, to really cradle the child properly. Tears slid down Violet's cheeks. A fight in a far corner of the cell flared up and died down quickly. It was night outside, the light from a few bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling seemed brighter now. There were more women in

the cell than Violet could count. She lay down in a narrow space, weak with exhaustion. She slept and then woke suddenly. There was such silence. The lights were off. The cell was so dark. She couldn't remember which side the door was on. She was desperate for water. With the sharp smell of her blanket and mat, and the heat, she fought to stop retching. She clasped her hands together to stop them trembling. A woman next to her reached out and touched her, resting her hand on Violet's thigh and then moved it to her breast. Violet froze. The hand moved away.

She lay awake fighting the panic that rose and then subsided and then built up again. She tried to stretch her legs out, but disturbed someone next to her and stopped. Her knees were aching from being bent for so long. A groan involuntarily escaped from her. She waited for someone to shout at her to be quiet, as they had done earlier in the evening at the intermittent cries some women had made. But no one responded. Violet drifted off again until the grind of a truck somewhere outside woke her. She listened until she could no longer hear the engine and it was quiet, with no sounds outside that she could detect. Then the trill of a bird calling over and over again. It stopped suddenly, but there was no responding call. It was quiet for a long time before she became aware that a chorus of birds had begun.

The clanging of a bell startled Violet. It rang on and on. The women around Violet woke up and began to fold their blankets and mats. She copied them. It was then she noticed the old blood stain on her mat. It had soaked right through. In the morning light she could see how many people were in the cell, but she lost count at 70. She looked for the woman who had wept softly during the night, but everyone's face was worn and weary.

The quiet chatter between the prisoners stopped each time the woman with the scar, who was pacing up and down the centre of the cell inspecting them sweeping and tidying, walked past. At the sound of the gate being opened everyone stood with their hands behind their backs and their eyes down. They remained that way as they filed out slowly past a wardress who counted them.

Outside, Violet looked up at the morning sky, a big blue above her, but a sharp click of someone's tongue next to her made her look down again quickly. She was one of four who were last in line and when they reached the pot there was only a scraping of burnt porridge for breakfast.

Back in the cell by mid-afternoon locked up for the night, Violet, even with her knees, wrists, shoulders and back aching from kneeling and polishing floors for hours, did not lie down. If she fell asleep now she worried she might wake in the early hours of the morning, to lie in the

dark wondering if anyone knew where she was, when would she get out, how had she forgotten her pass? And in the absolute stillness of those hours her panic would build.

Scratched into the paint on the wall behind were she sat were names and dates, some written in such small handwriting they were hard to decipher. Sometimes the reason for being there was added. Someone had claimed their offence as murder. Violet scanned the wall for more messages. At one she felt a jolt. It read: Beatrice, 08.08.61. Could that be Beatrice? She thought back to the day she had gone, did the date tally? She couldn't recall.

"What you in for?"

Violet looked at the woman who sat one person away from her. She looked as tired as Violet felt.

"I am Gladys," the woman said.

"Violet."

"And what happened, Violet?"

"Pass. I lost it or left it at home."

Gladys shook her head. "Why do you have the pass? Women don't have to have passes."

"We will soon, all of us will have to carry a pass," said a woman immediately next to Violet, who had introduced herself as Elsa.

"It was for my job. They said I had to get it," Violet said.

"Well, they are arresting women anyway, whether it's the law or not," Elsa said, pointing to Violet as proof.

"It is law now," another inmate said.

"No, it's not. That's what people think," Elsa said, clicking her tongue in anger. "Anyway, you'll be out soon," she said to Violet. "They can't keep you for long, they need space for the next intake of pass offenders. That's how the system works. A cycle of fear."

They lapsed into silence.

Then Gladys said: "I'll be here a while."

Violet was unsure of how to ask what she was in for. She didn't have to.

"Shoplifting. I admit I took it. Too tempting and easy to get away with it."

Violet looked surprised at her last statement.

"Well, I guess not always." She laughed, a deep throaty sound that was so welcome, Violet laughed with her.

Listening to Gladys's tales of shoplifting earned Violet a section of orange. Others nearby were treated too. "Eat quickly," Gladys said.

“Where did you get fruit?” a young girl asked. Her petulant tone surprised Violet for its boldness.

“I have ways and means,” Gladys said.

But the taste and scent of the orange did not help. It made Violet’s hunger worse. It hurt, the emptiness in her belly. She would not be last in line tomorrow when they left the cell for breakfast.

The guards who stood watching them as they polished the floors while on their hands and knees, didn’t scare Violet even though they easily used their batons to keep them working. She watched the scar woman in the cell, but she left Gladys alone and therefore Violet. But it was the sound of Brown Shoes approaching that terrified her. Gladys and Elsa had warned her that Brown Shoes liked to send people to solitary for nothing. It was a small, hot room, Gladys had said, where you got no food and saw no one for days. All day Violet thought she could hear the squeak and squelch of the brown shoes and even at night as she drifted off she woke with a start thinking she had heard the sound in the cell.

It was when everyone had settled down to sleep, and their breathing had become slower and quieter, that Violet thought of Beatrice. Where was she, had she been here at this jail? She had been so afraid of this place. Was she out of the country? Where was she? As she slept and then woke and fell asleep again in the cell that got hotter through the night, she dreamed, unable to stop the jumble of thoughts. Violet was not sure if she was awake or still asleep amid the terror she felt over a mistake she couldn’t rectify. There was a large book that was filled in by a wardress when they had come into the prison, their names and offences written in it. Now in her dream the charge was written down as murder. No one believed her that it was a mistake. She could get no one to listen, despite her pleas, that she hadn’t murdered anyone, and then she was naked and she had to open her legs and they were laughing. Who was laughing? She couldn’t see their faces.

She was wide awake now, looking into the deep darkness. Two women were whispering. It frightened her, the low, urgent voices. She started thinking of her mother. Violet pressed her fingernails into the skin on her arm, so hard that the pain of her nails cutting her skin stopped her thoughts churning. Then she pulled the blanket that lay half-covering her into a bundle and held onto it tight, the bulkiness of it anchoring her in the dark night.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

Once Mr Dickinson had left for work, and the girls for school, Keturia sat on the fan-shaped wire chair near the back door to have tea. She took off her shoes and rested her feet on the warm loose stones on the ground, troubling one with her toe as she watched pigeons line up on the top of the red-brick wall of the prison next door, strutting up and down with the blue sky rising above them.

She finished her tea and while busy in the laundry room she heard someone call out. She carried on sorting the clothes until there was another call. She walked past her room towards the back gate. A young man she didn't know stood on the other side. She stopped, not going further.

"Ma?"

She stayed where she was.

"Ma Mahlangu? Violet's mom?"

She walked closer. "Yes."

"I'm Enoch. Violet's in prison, up there." He indicated with his head up the hill towards the Women's Gaol.

"Who are you coming here saying things like that? My daughter does not make trouble, does not get into trouble. It's a mistake." But Keturia felt unsteady standing in the middle of the yard with nothing to hold onto. She walked to the gate and gripped its metal frame.

"No, she's there. A friend saw her getting arrested."

"For what? When? Why did they take her?"

"The pass. She didn't have her pass."

"She does have a pass."

Enoch didn't argue.

She turned and walked to the chair in the yard. She needed to sit down.

Enoch opened the gate and walked towards her. "Monday, I think. I only found out yesterday."

Keturia looked up at him. “They don’t like me to have visitors.”

“Ma, but are they here?”

“The neighbour watches, tells them.”

They were silent.

Enoch fidgeted with his hat, sliding the rim of it through his fingers. He put it on his head. “I have to get back.”

Keturia nodded, she couldn’t speak.

After he had gone she sat in the wire chair in the yard until her legs stopped shaking and she could get up to lock the house and close herself in her room until she heard Poppy, home from school, calling for her.

“Mrs Smit said you had a visitor today, Keturia,” Mr Dickenson said.

Keturia looked at him blankly.

“This morning. Mrs Smit said she saw you talking to a man in the lane, a smartly dressed man.”

“He was lost. Came down the alley and didn’t know where he was,” Keturia said.

Mr Dickenson stood in the kitchen tapping his foot on the floor, the sound of it irritating Keturia.

“I wonder where he gets the money to dress so smartly,” he said, his voice trailing off.

Keturia knew what the unfinished sentence meant. She turned to start on the dishes in the sink.

“I don’t like it that just anyone can come down the lane, especially people like that,” Mr Dickenson said.

Keturia, with her hands deep in the soapy water, was holding a glass so hard it cracked, cutting her palm. Blood bloomed in the dingy dishwater. Mr Dickenson left the kitchen to read his newspaper in the lounge, not noticing Keturia gripping the sink hard with her left hand, her head bowed. She found a rag under the sink that she pressed against the cut, and then took a plaster and mercurochrome out of a tin in the pantry and reached for one of the old, yellowing newspapers stacked on a low shelf. She put the newspaper on the kitchen table to stop the blood getting on it.

She applied the antiseptic and plaster, and when she was done she saw a familiar name under a headline, Beatrice Mangena. She remembered Beatrice arriving with Violet one day wearing a tailored pale pink skirt and matching jacket, a grey coat draped over her shoulders, her heels tapping too loudly on the slasto paving in the backyard. She had

reapplied her lipstick in the bathroom, walking slowly up the passage looking into the rooms. Keturia had shaken her head at her, but she wished she was here now. Beatrice always knew what to do.

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Keturia took the last sip of her sweet tea too quickly. She winced as the boiling liquid hit her throat and chest, tears sprang into her eyes. She opened her handbag, lifting the envelope to check again that it was closed. As she stepped out of her room a wind came up, gathering around her feet, and then moved off. Looking up, she saw dark clouds rushing across the sky from town. Yet the sun still glowed on the red brick above her window. As she closed the door, she had to pull it hard. It had swollen from the rain, requiring a yank to shut it properly — the noise seemed too loud. She looked towards the neighbour's house, for the twitching curtain. Two brown leaves floated towards her, taking their time to waft down and land in the yard. She picked one up, studying its outline. With its deep jagged indents and curled edges it was not from a tree nearby, and she wondered how it had come to be here. She crushed it in her hand, its brittleness gave a satisfying crunch. She looked again towards the neighbour's house — there was no indication she was being watched. It was the first chance she had to get away since hearing that Violet was in prison.

She left through the backyard gate, the whine of its hinges setting off the neighbour's dog, and she quickly shut it and turned right into the lane, which looked lonely under the dark clouds. She forced herself to walk slowly so as not to appear to be on urgent business. Her stomach churned painfully, and when she reached Kotze Street her heart hurt in her chest. She took a moment to catch her breath, watching the business of the street, the grind and hum of the traffic, people rushing past as the clouds now seemed to press lower.

Once across the street she turned right and walked a few paces until she was almost opposite the red-brick building. A group of men and a woman were standing on the pavement. She stopped nearby, close enough to be considered from a distance as perhaps one of them, far enough to walk away unnoticed if necessary. A crash of thunder startled her, yet her gasp and laugh that followed eased the tightness in her chest. Then the rain came down in great sheets of water, leaving Keturia to stand alone beneath her umbrella as people rushed past, heads down, to escape the downpour.

The tall doors and the iron gate across it were closed against the weather. Keturia noticed for the first time the black bars covering the windows above it. She had never seen

the door open and close, like a door should. The place looked perpetually shut up. The thin windows were set into the wall in pairs on either side of the door. There were six windows at the top, six at the bottom, narrow and recessed into the building. Could Violet look down at her, could she see her? Is this the door she had gone in? But the blank windows and closed door offered her nothing.

One Saturday when Keturia had walked up the lane, she had listened for sounds on the other side of the high prison wall, but had heard nothing. She had stopped on an almost empty Joubert Street Extension on a Sunday morning, when the road had no buses pushing up to the summit or hurtling down, but even then there was no sound from behind that high wall.

Once the rain had eased to a drizzle, Keturia saw a bird perch on the prison wall. It strutted along it before flying down behind the wall and then up again. And then it disappeared again before returning to the top of the wall, where it sat or walked or sat, all the time bubbling away to itself. She longed to be that bird.

Esther had said she shouldn't go, telling Keturia that Violet would be out in a few days, it was her first offence. Leave her, Esther had insisted. "You don't want to be seen there, that you know someone in prison. You could lose your job."

A van pulled up in front of the women's prison, coming to a sudden halt. The policemen in the front jumped out. One stood by the van, the other flung open the back doors. "*Kom, Kom*."

Women scrambled out. One slipped and fell onto the wet road. The policeman stood watching as she struggled to get to her feet. Keturia realised the front door of the prison had opened. A light inside shone out on the grim afternoon. She could see, set against one wall, a small semi-circular table polished to a gleam, and on it a vase with yellow flowers. A woman in uniform stood just inside the doorway, as those from the van were rushed up the stairs and into the prison. Keturia started towards the kerb to cross the road, but stopped at the sudden grind of the gate being locked and the slamming of the door. That was when she noticed the two policemen watching her through the misted side window of the police van. They drove off towards Hillbrow but when she looked back towards the vehicle she realised they were looking for a space in the traffic to do a U-turn. Looking for a chance to cross the road, she saw they were coming towards her, revving behind a bus that had stopped to take on more passengers. There was no easy gap in the traffic to cross the road, so she continued walking, making each step a steady one to slow her thudding heart. As she reached the corner so did the van; the two policemen looked at her before turning left and driving on towards town.

The rain had lifted and so had the top part of her right shoe. Sodden now, the fabric that was already worn thin had split from the sole and water pooled on the pavement slopped into it. Once the van disappeared into the traffic heading south, Keturia crossed the road and carried on down Joubert Street Extension. She needed the noise and the people pushing up and rushing down, and she didn't care now that she had left the house without saying that she was going. She didn't care now who knew.

Keturia sat in the garden as the sky lightened. A bird deep in the shrubbery was calling shrilly. It was the only time in this dull light that she felt no one was watching her. Even the nurses, who were awake, getting ready for their shifts, would not be able to see her in the faint morning light if they looked out their windows.

At the sound of leaves scattering Keturia looked to see Mr Dickenson walking across the lawn, then stopping midway to light a cigarette. He walked on and around the lawn, then sat on Felicity's wire chair, extinguished his cigarette, his shoulders slumped.

Keturia rose quietly from the bench, and walked towards the backyard, stopping to pick three ripe tomatoes for their breakfast.

When Mr Dickenson had finished his egg and bacon, he collected his briefcase from its designated spot in the dining room. Standing at the kitchen door, about to leave for work, he said to Keturia: "First light is the best time of the day, don't you think, Keturia? A good time to clear your head before the day begins."

She did not respond, but Mr Dickenson smiled anyway.

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

Throughout the last month of the school year Poppy had hoped they would drive to Durban to fetch her mother. Birdie had shown her the shelf in the library where the map books were.

Looking at a map of South Africa, Poppy traced with her finger the road from Johannesburg to Durban. “How long does it take?”

Birdie was sitting with Poppy at a table sticking return-date slips into the back of a pile of books. “How long does what take?”

“To drive to Durban?”

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“How many times you have to stop when your car overheats.”

Poppy laughed.

“Poppy, why so much interest in Durban?”

“We are going there in December.”

Birdie looked at her, her head tilted to one side, a small furrow between her eyes. She stacked the books on a wooden trolley. “Come, you can help me shelve these.”

They worked their way up and down the aisles, Poppy shelving the books on the low shelves, Birdie the high shelves.

“Do you have any books on Durban?” Poppy asked.

Birdie found a large hard-cover book with colour photographs of the city. She left Poppy at the table to look at it while she checked out the books of other customers.

Near the sea was a huge swimming pool with slides on either end, bigger than the Zoo Lake pool, Poppy thought, and a photo of the beach thronging with people and so many umbrellas Poppy lost count.

“It’s almost time to close up, Poppy,” Birdie said.

“Can I take this book out?”

Birdie always looked at the last time the book had been checked out. But Poppy had already checked. “This one was last returned on 13 May 1959.”

Birdie closed her eyes and then opened them. “That would have been a Wednesday.”

Poppy waited while Birdie switched off the lights and locked the door. They walked together along Kotze Street and turned down Claim Street. On Saturdays Birdie brought two extra slices of bread in her lunchbox, which she fed to the pigeons in the park.

They settled on a bench. The birds gathered on the lawn in front of them, as if they knew Birdie.

“So you’re going to Durban for a holiday?” Birdie said.

“I need to get a new swimming costume. I’ll ask Bella to take me, and a swimming towel. I like your sunglasses. Where do I get sunglasses?”

Birdie said nothing. They watched the birds fighting each other off to get to the crumbs they had thrown on the lawn.

“Well, we’re also going to fetch my mom.”

Poppy filled Birdie’s silence. “She’s been there visiting friends. So she wants to be home for Christmas.”

“Did your dad say you were going to Durban, Poppy?”

“He said we would go when Mom was better.” Poppy stopped talking suddenly, she felt a rush of heat on her face. She couldn’t look at Birdie, and so she said to the big book she held on her lap: “I have to go.”

“Poppy, wait.”

Poppy stood in front of Birdie, the birds pecking around her feet.

Birdie reached for Poppy’s hand. “I don’t think you are going to Durban.”

Poppy didn’t like the way Birdie looked at her, with eyebrows raised and her head tilted in concern.

“Your mom is not in Durban.”

Poppy pulled her hand out of Birdie’s grasp. “What do you mean?”

“She didn’t go to Durban. She’s in a hospital near Johannesburg.”

Poppy felt the the strength drain out of her legs. The sounds of the park seemed to recede. “That’s not true. How would you know anyway?”

“Bella told me.”

“Bella? You hardly know Bella.”

“We are friends, Poppy.”

“You’re not. She hardly ever goes to the library.”

"I know Nico."

"Who's Nico?"

"Bella's boyfriend."

"You're just jealous we're going to Durban. And Bella does not have a boyfriend." And then she ran, scattering the birds, which flew up as she ran through them, the sound of their wings flapping hard thundering in her ears.

Keturia's mouth was set hard. She looked quickly at Poppy as she came through the back door and then turned to towards the sink. She stood there looking through the window above it.

Poppy could smell the cooked meat and cabbage. She walked up to Keturia and stood next to her. "Ketty?"

Keturia looked down at her. "You been crying?"

"No."

"Then why does your face look like that?" She put one arm around Poppy's shoulder. "Go wash your face, you're a mess."

Poppy walked up the passage to the bathroom. But stopped at the door, turned around and walked a few steps back down the passage. She stood against the passage wall opposite the open door of her parents' bedroom. Poppy's hands were behind her, her foot resting against the skirting board. Her mother sat on the edge of the bed, both of her hands, one on either side of her thighs, were pushed down against the bed.

"Mom?"

Felicity raised her head and looked at Poppy, then closed her eyes. Poppy could see her grip on the bedspread tighten. Then she opened her eyes slowly and looked again at Poppy, who hadn't moved. "Take your hands off the wall and your foot, you will make marks."

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

She hoped she hadn't said it. Take your foot off the wall. To Poppy when she saw her. The child looked terrible. Dirty. Was there blood on her face? Felicity wondered if she had hit her. She was not hot. She was calm, she told herself. No, that was months ago. She pressed her hands down next to her into the bed. It steadied her. She smiled at her daughter. But she didn't get a smile back, just a look of curiosity from Poppy. She should offer to run the child a bath. But when she did, Poppy said no and walked away, closing the bathroom door with a faint click. Felicity thought she heard crying. She went and stood outside the bathroom door, but she could only hear running water.

She walked back to her bedroom. She needed to lie down, just for a bit. The doctor and Harold had said she would need to sleep. There were tablets she had to take every day, morning and night. The pillowcase was cool beneath her cheek. It smelled freshly ironed. She covered herself with the blanket her mother had knitted for her, and held a corner in her hands. As she fell asleep, she hoped the trembling inside her would be gone when she woke.

CHAPTER FORTY

Every morning in the weeks before Christmas Felicity got up just as the sun was rising. In the faint light she took her tea to the wire table and chair in the front garden, and while drinking it, smoked two cigarettes. She then gardened. The first few days were a fury of trimming shrubs that had become an overgrown tangle in the heat and drenching late-afternoon rain. When the garden was under control, Felicity planted seeds in sections of beds she had cleared and deadheaded the roses, talking to herself as she did. Poppy watched all of this from the Belhambra tree that she had crept up into soon after she heard the click of the front door closing. When Felicity stopped and stood still, breathing slowly and deeply, Poppy watched her more closely. It was then that her mother's rage sometimes came. Once, after what seemed to be a silent scream, Felicity ripped a daisy bush from the ground. It lay on the lawn for days before Harold threw the shrivelled plant onto the compost heap.

In those weeks with no school Poppy cycled through the cool, shady streets, sometimes riding past the zoo to the lake and the swimming pool. She once found herself outside the doctor's house. He was in his garden with the little dog, but when Poppy greeted him she realised he didn't remember her. She found another library, better than Birdie's. It was across the road from a small strip of shops. Poppy sometimes bought an ice cream and then sat in the little park next to the library deciding on her route home. It was either up Roscommon to Kildare and then Kildare to Westcliff Drive where, if she turned right, the road looped around the side of the hill and then up through Parktown. Or she could turn left towards Jan Smuts, cross over and cycle back through Forest Town.

The days were longer, but when darkness fell it did so suddenly. Poppy was sure to leave no later than quarter past five. She had a watch now. Her father had given it to her for her birthday. Bella had given her a book. *The Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa*. It was a new book, Bella had said, published that year, so Poppy was one of the first people to read it. There was a card to "Dearest Poppy", and signed "Love, Mom", but Poppy knew Bella's writing and she threw it away. The night of her birthday they had cake after supper. Bella switched off the light in the dining room and then brought the cake through from the kitchen

with the candles blazing. All three of them laughed when Poppy blew out the candles, plunging them into darkness.

If Poppy was at Zoo Lake pool she could see if dark clouds were building up behind the Westcliff hill, then she had to take the shortest route home. But if she was outside the library she couldn't see the rain approaching and would then have to cycle home in the rain.

Five days before Christmas Harold called for Poppy. She ignored him. He walked further into the garden. "Poppy, I need your help. Where are you?"

From high up in the Belhambra tree she looked down at his balding head. She could see his eyelashes clearly from this angle, usually obscured by the thick lens of his glasses.

"OK, well, when you have time come find me."

Poppy counted to 103 before she dropped her book bag and herself onto the lawn beneath the tree. She found her father sitting at the kitchen table reading a recipe book.

"Oh Pops, there you are. Do know how to cook a turkey?"

"No."

"Neither do I. Shall we try?"

The turkey arrived with the butcher's last delivery for the year. Bella said she would make mince pies for after the meal. Poppy wanted ice cream to go with them.

"I'll get the ice cream," Felicity said. They hadn't seen her standing by the kitchen door. She smiled at Poppy.

"It's OK, I'll go," said Harold.

"What else do we need?" Felicity said.

"Let me drive you."

"It's just up the hill, Harold. Make a list, Poppy, I'm going to change."

Poppy took a small notebook from the kitchen drawer. Bella told her what to write down, adding items to cover them until after New Year's when the shops would reopen.

Felicity came back to the kitchen wearing a brown skirt with a yellow blouse. She had applied lipstick.

"I can go tomorrow. The shops will still be open until noon," Harold said.

"The day before Christmas? It will be chaos."

She stood next to Harold, waiting for him to give her money.

Poppy saw her father glance up at the kitchen clock as Felicity left the house.

As they basted the turkey, and checked repeatedly that they were following the instructions of *The Constance Spry Cookery Book*, Poppy asked her father: "Why doesn't Mom really ever talk to me?"

"Of course she does."

"Not really. Well, sometimes I suppose."

"Oh, she's like that with all of us. She's still getting better."

"What's wrong with her?"

Harold didn't answer as he again consulted the cookery book.

Poppy thought her mother talked to her, but not with her. She heard her parents at night, talking, laughing once, mostly arguing, behind their closed bedroom door. She had heard her mother telling Bella not to marry the first man who came along. Her father heard too. He picked up his newspaper and carried on reading, but Poppy saw his hands shake.

The turkey cooked all morning, with Harold peering through the oven door at regular intervals; each time he opened it his glasses steamed up. The third time, Bella winked at Poppy as Harold walked into the kitchen. They watched him open the oven door, bend down to look into the oven, and then once again step back quickly as his glasses misted. Bella and Poppy laughed. Harold did too as he wiped his glasses clean.

"Dad, the turkey will cook, don't worry," Bella said.

They sat at the table that Bella and Poppy had set with the white linen cloth and the pink patterned crockery that was kept in the sideboard for most of the year. Poppy had tied tinsel to each chair, and placed red napkins at each place.

"Where are these flowers from?" Felicity asked.

"The garden," Poppy said.

"Who picked them?"

"I did," Bella said.

They fell silent, eating, except for Felicity, who pushed her food around her plate. "Where's the gravy? I can't eat this without gravy."

Poppy looked down at the table, but as the silence stretched she looked up to see Bella staring at her mother hard. Felicity looked away, and then rose from the table and left the room, leaving her plate with its uneaten food.

Bella's face was flushed, sweat glistened above her upper lip, she sipped her iced water slowly and then placed the glass carefully on the table. Her voice was unsteady when she said: "It's so hot. Good idea of yours, Poppy, to get ice cream."

Poppy smiled at her sister. "This tastes good, Dad."

"Thanks to you, Pops. Bella, I think, also needs credit for supervising me."

They talked as they ate seconds and then ice cream, leaving the mince pies Bella had baked for the next day. Harold put on records, and with the front door open Poppy and Bella could hear the music as they ran through the sprinkler on the lawn, only stopping when their dresses were sodden and stuck to their bodies.

CHAPTER FORTY ONE

Violet never told her mother of the way the guards stripped her and hurt her. She could never tell a thing like that to anyone. She returned to work the day after she was released from prison. And for weeks, each time she stepped off the bus and began to walk to the shop her palms became wet with sweat. She always had it with her, the pass, checking that it was tucked into her brassiere before she left home, checking it was still there as the bus swayed and stopped and lurched its way from Meadowlands into town. She never walked up Hospital Street; instead she watched those who got off the bus, looking to see if there was any indication the police were about. How had she not noticed that day, that the usual stream of people who walked up Hospital Street had taken other routes, she thought over and over again to herself.

Violet no longer joined Enoch and Eliza at lunchtime on Tuesdays and Friday, preferring to sit in the dank backyard behind the shop, despite the smell rising from the drains. Once she climbed the long back staircase to the top of the building that rose above the shop and where Eliza worked. They sat outside the open door of Eliza's room, Violet on a rickety chair, Eliza on an overturned crate, and drank tea in the sun that baked down on the bare rooftop. But Violet didn't go again, after she heard Mrs De Wet tell Jilly, who seemed unable to discourage her visits, that they wanted people moved from the rooms on the roof. It would be very hard, Mrs de Wet had said, for those, like her, who needed their maid to come in early to make tea, if the maids had to live all the way out of town and get the train there and back.

One Tuesday Eliza came to the lane at the back of the shop and convinced Violet to come out with her and Enoch. They walked a few blocks and Enoch fell into step with them as they walked past. They walked in silence, a quietness between the three of them that did not need chatter to fill it.

When they had finished lunch, Enoch lay back on the grass resting on one elbow. He turned to Violet. "You should find another job. Get away from Kotze Street."

Eliza nodded.

Violet shrugged. It was a conversation Enoch had tried before, in the first few days after she had come out of prison.

"They may have a job at the Henkelmans' shop in Norwood," Enoch said.

"It's further to travel. I'd have to leave a lot earlier than I already do."

"What about the shop where Rose works, maybe they have something?" Eliza said.

Violet folded the napkin she had wrapped her sandwiches in into an increasingly small square, and when it could be folded no more she held it in her hand and stared into the distance ahead.

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Violet stood in the small alcove in the shop were they stocked vases and ribbons, making up bouquets. She snipped off the faded blooms and set them carefully in a small wicker basket on the counter. The stems she dropped in a dustbin. Of the wilted flowers that were to be discarded there were always some blooms that still had a few bright petals amid the faded ones. Ma Dlamini had asked for dark pink rose petals, if Violet could get them. The dark pink ones were Violet's favourite. She kept the petals encased gently in tissue in a small tin firmly lodged at the bottom of her handbag. It had been Violet's suggestion that Ma Dlamini also use rose petals, and not only the pelargonium flowers that grew in the garden, for decorations on her cakes and biscuits.

On Saturdays, she could take home flowers that would be past their best by Monday. She set them in a vase on the kitchen table, or if they were lilies she asked Menzi to put them in his mother's room.

The last order for the day before the shop closed at lunchtime on Saturday was for deep pink roses, but when Violet had made up the arrangement, the customer changed her mind, wanting instead red roses, and so Violet had a bouquet of dark pink roses to take home.

It was one thing to have flowerheads in her handbag, another to be holding a bouquet on the journey home. Violet had to endure the taunts from men and the looks and whispers from women on the bus. One, speaking to her friend but loud enough for Violet to hear, suggested she was showing off, to which Violet smiled, hopefully, she thought, mysteriously and the woman turned away with a huff.

As Violet reached the last block before home, now weary of carrying the flowers, which, as she was, were wilting in the afternoon heat, she saw Menzi running towards her, his face full of excitement. He stood in front of her and as she tried to proceed by moving around him, he sidestepped in front of her again.

Violet smiled at him. “What are you so excited about?”

He waved a rope he carried in his hand. “Do you want to see me skip?”

“Not now, I’m tired. I want to get home. You can show me later, OK.” Her small handbag even seemed too heavy now.

“It’s a new rope and I have to show you.”

But Violet walked on a few paces. Then she stopped and turned back to look at him. “Menz, don’t be sad. I do want to see your skipping. But let’s get home. You can show me later, once I’ve taken these shoes off.”

His face brightened. “OK, if your feet are tired, let’s walk slowly.”

But Violet kept up her a clipped pace, calling back to him “Menz, come on, let’s get home.”

He ran to catch up with her. “Look here,” he said, pointing to his right knee, “I have tired knees.”

Violet laughed. “How did that happen?”

He shrugged as he hobbled a few steps. They were now a few houses from home, and he unfurled his rope and began to skip. Violet stopped to watch.

A sharp series of whistles caught their attention. It was Lwazi at the gate of the house. At his brother’s call, Menzi wrapped up his rope and dashed to the gate, into the front garden and around the side of the house.

Lwazi smiled at Violet as she came through the gate and the two of them walked together around the side of the house. Violet gasped, a small shriek escaped from her followed by a laugh, when, as she walked into the back garden, they broke out in song, singing happy birthday so loudly the neighbours came out of their houses to see the spectacle. Keturia was there with Ma Dlamini, Menzi, unable to contain his excitement, was jumping up and down, Lwazi leaned into his mother. Enoch and Eliza, Stanley and Dora, and Rose also stood in the garden singing.

Violet covered her face with her hands, shaken from the surprise, not knowing where to look or what to do. Ma Dlamini embraced her and directed her to a seat next to her mother. Keturia patted Violet’s arm, a gesture Violet knew so well, one which had never felt enough when she was a child. Now the familiar touch was more than enough.

They sat in a loose, large circle around the kitchen table, which had been brought into the back garden and set up, with extra chairs borrowed from the neighbours, under the peach tree. There was a cake Ma Dlamini had made iced in dark pink, with the number eighteen daintly iced on the bottom left-hand corner of the cake. In the opposite corner was a cluster of small white flowers, which Menzi told her could be eaten. He showed her by popping one in his mouth. His mother shouted at him to leave the cake alone, but laughing as she did. There was beer and cold drinks that Stanley and Dora had brought and Enoch's mutton stew, with a fruit salad from Eliza. Dora fetched a vase from the kitchen and put Violet's flowers in it and set them on the table next to the cake. Menzi and Lwazi sat on the back steps eating their lunch and then edged themselves between the adults around the table to pour themselves glasses of Fanta Orange, until their mother hugged them and then shooed them gently away.

When the heat of the day had passed and they had laughed at Dora's mimicry of the director of the play she was rehearsing for, or Eliza's stories of the goings-on in the block of flats where she worked, they sat in comfortable silence.

A breeze came up and at the sudden coolness Violet rubbed the goosebumps that had sprung up on her arms. They could hear the sound of barking dogs nearby and the slamming of doors, shouting. Violet and Ma Dlamini looked at each other, and she wondered if she knew if Beatrice had been taken. Violet was too scared to ask. Car doors slammed and as the sound of the car became louder they all looked towards the street on the other side of their neighbour's house. A police car drove fast, the dust it left in its wake slowly settled back on the road. As the roar of its engine faded, they could hear a woman crying.

They lay in the dark, Violet and her mother, who was sleeping in the bed that Rose, who had been relegated to the kitchen floor, usually slept in. Violet's body ached from the week at work, and the party that had stretched into the night. She closed her eyes, drifted off, only to be jolted awake. She smiled to herself in the dark as she recalled the dancing that evening in the garden, candles flickering on the table, Menzi, who had sat on his mother's lap, falling asleep despite the energetic discussions around him.

Then her thoughts wandered beyond Ma Dlamini's garden, to the neighbours' dusty dry yards, and the rutted street beyond, and the small house after small house beyond that, stretching so far. She could hear her mother breathing slowly and deeply as she slept.

Violet said into the darkness of the room. "Is this it, Ma?"

She didn't expect an answer.

THE END

Home

Reflective Essay

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Home is an appropriated space; it does not exist objectively in reality. The notion of 'home' is a fiction we create out of a need to belong. Home is a place most people have never been to. Home serves a similar function to zero in mathematics. It provides us with a beginning or a basis from which to evaluate other spaces: how they fulfil functional and aesthetic needs as we relate to or move through them in the business of living."

Santu Mofokeng [1]

INTRODUCTION

Memories of childhood often centre on a home and its immediate location, unsurprisingly, as children's worlds are usually confined, when they are young, to their home and neighbourhood. As they grow, so do their memories map onto a wider geography. Home gives texture to our childhood recollections: the smell of a chicken stuffed with rosemary roasting in the oven, the feel of the rough weave of a cushion cover crocheted in thick wool by a paternal grandmother, the sound of water groaning through pipes, the smell of spring — dust and rain mingling in the air while playing barefoot on the crisp, dry lawn and in summer the unbearably sweet stench of rotting fruit beneath the apricot trees, with fruit flies swarming up as you pick your way through the orchard on tiptoe. Hiraeth.[2] A longing for a place to which you cannot return.

But a home is not only a place of benign recollections. It is where a mother raged, where angry silence was more crushing than being cursed at, where an architrave split from the wall as a door was slammed by a father whose desperation erupted. Home is where

[1] Mofokeng, S. "Appropriated Spaces". In *Blank _Architecture, apartheid and after*, 1998, Judin, H and Vladislavic, I. (editors) Rotterdam: NAi Publishers

[2] Hiraeth is a Welsh word that does not easily translate into English. Collins describes the meaning as such: "A homesickness for a home to which you cannot return, or a home which maybe never was." https://www.collinsdictionary.com/word-lovers-blog/new/14-untranslatable-emotions-that-english-cant-convey,155,HCB.html Accessed 05/03/2020

people were evicted from because they lived where they were not allowed, did not have the right permit, were not married, were men, were women, were unemployed or did not have the right kind of employment. Home is where police raided in the early hours of the morning demanding pass books, and to know where certain people were, and if they were found they were taken away. Home is where people did not come home.

As an adult, childhood recollections come with a wider knowledge of the society in which one grew up and memories of the space we called home can take on new meaning. Santu Mofokeng, in his book *Santu Mofokeng*,[3] writes of a high-spirited encounter in about 1966 when he was 10 years old, but his memory of stealing fruit is layered with the harsher economic and political realities of growing up in Soweto.[4] Mofokeng writes: "A lamp post stands directly in front of our house in the Orlando East of my youth. Every evening I would escape the gloom of our family room — dimly lit by candle and the blue and ember flames of the brazier fire, in which hangs the smog, the pungent smell of carbon monoxide, boiling cabbage or offal — to avoid the gaze of my elders, petty errands and dull adult conversation; in order to pursue the company and mischief of other children playing hide and seek by the street light. 'Black *maipatile*' we called this game. Screaming 'mee mmee!' we would disappear into the gardens of mielies, climb peach or apricot trees and hide behind hedges until discovered. This frolic provided an opportunity to steal peaches or apricots." [5]

Mofokeng, who grew up in Newclare, Sophiatown and Orlando East, also writes of the tsotsis who preyed on commuters arriving home late in the dark and the blackjacks, municipal police who implemented apartheid's laws, the challenges his mother, as a single parent, faced in supporting her family and how his aunt, as the elder sister, inherited the house, and "allocated one room to mom and us six children". [6] All points to the complicated place called home and the specific difficulties — a lack of secure housing, without safe and efficient heating, and low-paid work — a Black family encountered during apartheid.

As an adult, when I, too, consider my home — not my childhood home but rather the home I currently live in, how do I reconcile (if indeed I do) its place in history? I have used

[3] Mofokeng, S. 2001. *Santu Mofokeng,* Johannesburg: David Krut.

[4] Joyce Sikakane in her book *A Window on Soweto* writes: "Only fifteen in a hundred houses have electricity." Sikakane, J. 1977. *A Window on Soweto,* London: International Defence & Aid Fund. (Page 9)

[5] Mofokeng, S. 2001. *Santu Mofokeng,* Johannesburg: David Krut. (Page 25)

[6] Mofokeng, S. (Page 26)

my home as the focus for this reflective essay — examining the meaning this 109-year-old house holds for those who lived or worked here. The preamble to this is that the kernel of the idea for the manuscript *Hospital Hill* was triggered by another house on Hospital Hill, now named Constitution Hill. A family member lived in the house on Hospital Hill at 43a Joubert Street Extension. It was rented by his father between 1954 and 1964. There are no family photos of the house, but maps[7] and aerial photos of the house and its surrounds (that I sourced through social media) show its location on a lane off Joubert Street Extension that runs from Empire Road to the top of the hill where the Women's Prison (now part of Constitution Hill) was located. [8]

For the purposes of the novel the house's location, its relation to the prison, neighbouring houses, the nurses' home and the Queen Victoria maternity hospital are factual. But plans for the house could not be found at the Johannesburg City Council. Therefore, the interior of the home and Keturia Dlamini's room in the backyard of the property are fictional, as are the characters in the manuscript.

Despite the house on Hospital Hill once existing (it was demolished to make way for a parking garage at Constitution Hill), the manuscript is fiction, with the Dickenson family in the novel bearing no resemblance to my family who lived in the house. Rather, the house, which was located about 10 metres from the boundary wall of the prison known as Number 4, was the trigger for the novel – that is, a white South African family living so close to one of the most notorious prisons in South Africa, yet deliberately unaware of the horrors on the other side of the high red-brick wall. This was replicated throughout the country, where well-built white suburban homes almost all had a small, poorly constructed and equipped backroom where a domestic worker lived, without the comforts of hot water and electricity, and no security of tenure. The residents of the house overlooked the profound discrepancies between their home and that of their employee living a few metres away, as easily as they were able to claim ignorance of the hardships faced by those who lived in the vast settlements

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[7] *Holmden's Register of Greater Johannesburg Townships,* 1954. Johannesburg: Map Office.

[8] Aerial photos of Hospital Hill include an undated photograph emailed to me by Marc Latilla, who wrote the book *Johannesburg Then and Now* and has a blog, "Johannesburg 1912", in which he writes about the history of Johannesburg. Other aerial photos and maps of Constitution Hill were posted in response to a request I made on a discussion on the Facebook group The Johannesburg Heritage Foundation. https://www.facebook.com/groups/112707830122/search/?query=Samantha%20Enslin-Payne&epa=SEARCH_BOX Accessed 09/03/2020

of matchbox houses far from white suburbia, or in the case of Hospital Hill, the prison right next door.

Mark Gevisser says in an interview when he was content adviser to Constitution Hill's heritage, education and tourism team: "So the Old Fort and its prisons were some kind of absent centre, a place that was literally overlooked — in two senses: they were neglected, ignored, but also, quite strangely for a place of incarceration, they were right in the middle of the city. So if you lived in those then rather stylish modernist apartment blocks you could sit there on your balcony, doing whatever it is you did on a Saturday afternoon and look down at the prisoners doing their exercises or having to dance the *tauza* without actually seeing them." He adds that for Black people The Fort was not an absent centre but a terrifying place that destroyed loved ones. [9]

The form of this essay is a blend of fact and fiction. Fact, based on the research I have done for both the manuscript and the essay. Fiction, because in order to grapple with the meaning of a home, and my house in particular, I needed to imagine how the space was used by those who lived or worked here. Not fanciful imaginings, but based on the literature and photographs I have consulted. This includes photographs by Ernest Cole [10], David Goldblatt,[11] Santu Mofokeng,[12] Peter Magubane [13] and others, as well as fiction and nonfiction written in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s that were useful to get closer to the texture of the time in which the manuscript *Hospital Hill* was set. More recently published books I reference either reflect back on apartheid or illuminate how the inequality of the past is still present in the present.

The focus of this essay is not the house on Hospital Hill in which my character Poppy and her family live. Instead, the basis for this essay is the 109-year-old home I live in. By the accounts shared with me by a family member, the house on Hospital Hill was in many respects similar to the original size and age of the home I live in.

My house, designed by the architect John Adams in 1911 for H. Bruce Hubbard, was referred to as Hubbard House — and I will call it that throughout this essay — in an entry on

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[9] Gevisser, M. 2004. "From the Ruins: The Constitution Hill Project" http://markgevisser.com//images/pdf/public_culture_interview.pdf Accessed 05/02/2020

[10] Cole, E. 1967. *House of Bondage*, New York: A Ridge Press, Book Random House

[11] Goldblatt, D. 1998. *South Africa: The Structure of Things Then*, Cape Town: Oxford University Press

[12] Mofokeng, S. 2001. *Santu Mofokeng*, Johannesburg: David Krut.

[13] Johnson, J. and Magubane, P. 1979. *Soweto Speaks*, Johannesburg: AD Donker

Adams on an architectural website. [14] It was one of the first houses to be built in the suburb, then called Park View[15] (now referred to as Parkview) in Johannesburg. The details of the property, its location and who used the space and how are explored later in the essay.

The essay is divided into three parts: 1911, the period when the house was first built, owned and occupied by the Hubbards. In this section I focus on Jane Hubbard,[16] whose privilege enabled her to reside in Hubbard House, and what burdens that came with. In 1961, I focus on Lydia Sebola,[17] who works and lives in the back room at Hubbard House. I have used this section to explore the house from the perspective of someone whose experience of Hubbard House was underpinned by the exploitation prevalent during colonialism and apartheid. From the 1930s, domestic work had become a major source of income for Black women [18] and still is today. Statistics South Africa's most recent Quarterly Labour Force Survey, for the fourth quarter of 2019, shows that just over one million people work as domestic workers, most of whom are women.[19] The third section focuses on my own grappling with Hubbard House and what the space and its contents passed down over several generations mean in 2020.

Of the seven owners of this house, five have been white women. This is noteworthy, given the economic constraints white women ostensibly faced (but clearly not to the same degree Black women did) in relation to white men — such as limits to the type of work they could generally do and the lower pay as a result. Yet they still retained a privileged position in society. In this essay I focus on the women who lived in Hubbard House. Tasked with caring for a home, they encounter space differently to men. Of course, being a caretaker of a

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[14] John Adams is the architect who designed Hubbard House, according to the plans of 13 April 1911. Adams came to South Africa in 1900. He died in 1918 while being held as a prisoner of war in Germany. https://www.artefacts.co.za/main/Buildings/archframes.php?archid=1966 and http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect_full.php?id=407465 Accessed 30/01/2020

[15] Parkview was laid out as a suburb in 1906. Chapman, C. "A brief history of Parkview". An article on the website The Heritage Portal. http://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/brief-history-parkview First published in 1987. Republished on 3 November 2015. Accessed 25/01/2020

[16] Jane is a fictional character for the purposes of this essay. I was not able to establish if H. Bruce Hubbard was married.

[17] Lydia Sebola is a fictional character for the purposes of this essay.

[18] Ginsburg, R. 2011. *At Home With Apartheid The Hidden Landscapes of Domestic Service in Johannesburg,* Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press

[19] http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02114thQuarter2019.pdf Accessed 5/03/2020

home in which you are employed is an entirely different experience to being the curator of a home you own, both during apartheid and currently, as many of the patterns of exclusion are still prevalent.

Rebecca Ginsburg, in her book *At Home with Apartheid: The Hidden Landscapes of Domestic Service in Johannesburg,* writes: "We can speak of multiple landscapes — coexisting, sometimes competing modes of engagement with a single site." [20] In this essay, the single site is Hubbard House.

1911

JANE

Jane Hubbard had not expected this piece of stony ground to be their destination when her husband Henry took her for a drive. He had borrowed a friend's car for the excursion. Now, she watched Henry[21] kick the dust with his shoes and then, with his hands in his trouser pockets, rock back and forth on his heels as he looked up the slope of the plot of land. She followed his gaze as he told her that the site had been pegged out at just over a quarter of an acre, [22] like most of the plots in this new suburb Park View.[23] It was close to the bottom of the hill that ended in a shallow valley and a small lake. She listened to her husband telling her he had considered the stand next door, but this corner plot had a view of the lake. He particularly liked, he told her, the two road frontages, where on one road there would be a pedestrian entrance for guests. Jane didn't respond when he suggested she could do a small

[20] Ginsburg, R. 2011. *At Home with Apartheid: The Hidden Landscapes of Domestic Service in Johannesburg,* Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press. (Ginsburg, R. Page 4)

[21] H. Bruce Hubbard, ESQ was the first owner of Erf 123, Park View. His first name is not known. Henry Hubbard is fictional name for the purposes of this essay.

[22] 1020 square metres

[23] Park View was laid out as a suburb in 1906. Chapman, C. "A brief history of Parkview". An article on the Heritage Portal. http://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/brief-history-parkview First published in 1987. Republished on 3 November 2015. Accessed 25/01/2020

formal garden in front of the house with roses. The other road, Henry told Jane, would have a gate for deliveries. The kitchen will be at the back.

Jane knew that it was so he wouldn't be bothered by the running of the household. She felt weak as the sun bore down on this bleak plot with no shade and he talked on and on about the large back garden and the chicken run, fruit trees and vegetables he envisaged. He didn't add, Jane thought, that it was also somewhere for the children he expected to play out of the way when he wanted to sit undisturbed on the front veranda. Jane had reservations and not only about having children. There wasn't much here besides dusty roads, veld, a few houses already built and a few more rising from the ground. They had two comfortable rented rooms in town, with all the shops she needed. Henry had no idea what it would take to run a house of the size he was envisaging. He often had no idea, she thought.

His work for a company that supplied timber to the mines had led Henry to this corner plot. It was his job to ensure delivery of the sturdy timber props as deeper mine shafts were dug. The area around the lake had been planted with blue gums and pines and it was on a trip to discuss supply from Sachsenwald [24] that he had taken a detour along the dusty roads nearby through this new suburb.

As the house was being built, Henry was meticulous in tracking its progress in line with the plans. After dinner he rolled out the large piece of paper with the house plans showing the frontage, the side elevation and the details of building materials. As Jane listened, he counted the rooms again: two bedrooms, a sitting room and a dining room. The bathroom had a press, and the kitchen, a pantry and a store. [25] [26] There was an entrance hall, where he told Jane he would store their umbrellas and the walking stick he had had carved while in India. Jane thought to herself that he planned to take the stick for walks around the lake. He read out loud the details on the plans: downpipes and gutters, adequate ventilation in

[24] Lucille Davie writes that Sachsenwald Forest "was planted by the first mining magnates to supply poles for supporting the mine shafts as mining went deep level. The forest started in Parktown and moved down the hill to the zoo and Zoo Lake, and several of its original trees, over 100 years old, can still be seen in these locations." Davie, L. "Brenthurst, Joburg's breathtaking secret garden". First published on the City of Joburg's website on 2 February 2004. This version published on 23 January 2019 on The Heritage Portal. http://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/brenthurst-joburgs-breathtaking-secret-garden Accessed 05/03/2020

[25] A cupboard or shelved closet or recess. Definition in Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary 1965.

[26] House plans for residence on stand 123, Park View, for H.B. Hubbard, ESQ by John Adams Architect, 5 Lancaster Buildings. Site passed 13/4/1911. Plans sourced from the Johannesburg City Council

closets, types of bricks to be used (stock bricks), measures against damp (tar), foundations of stone, mortar of lime, roof of iron. [27]

During these evenings, Henry tried to pace out the size of the rooms for Jane to show her how much more space they would have, but in their snug quarters it was not possible. So he told her, again, and she listened, again, to the measurements he read off the plans. The largest room was the dining room at 19.2 feet (5.85 metres) by 15.6 feet (4.75 metres) [28], and the smallest room (excluding the bathroom, pantry and store), the sitting room, was 12 feet by 12 feet. All rooms, except the kitchen, had a ceiling height of 11 feet. [29] Henry had ordered the pressed-steel ceilings from England, a different design for each room. [30]

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Kabelo Lekota stamped the ground and rubbed his hands together to try to get warm. His first job was to get the fire going and keep it stoked throughout the day for the bricklayers and carpenters' tea. He also had to be on hand to fetch tools, empty the wheelbarrows and mix plaster. Once the fire was going he took the opportunity to fry a few pieces of bread in a bit of fat. It was likely all he would eat until after sundown. At the beginning of winter he had taken to sleeping in the forest that rose up around the lake so he did not have to spend two hours travelling to work and another two hours to get home in the evening.[31] In one area, pine trees had been planted too close together and the ground in between was thickly layered with fallen pine needles. It served as his bed.

As the building of the house progressed, several small rooms had been built near the back boundary of the property, on the other side of which was a lane with houses or plots staked out along its length. One of these rooms the builders referred to as the boy's room, a

[27] Municipal Council of Johannesburg, Application for approval of plans on Erf 123 Park View. 15/8/1911.

[28] 19.2 feet is 5.85 metres and 15.6 feet is 4.75 metres

[29] Plans for residence on stand 123 Park View for HB Hubbard, ESQ by John Adams Architect. 13/4/1911

[30] Bawcombe, P. and Scannell, T. 1973. *Philip Bawcombe's Johannesburg,* Johannesburg: Village Publishing

[31] Homeless people continue to live at Zoo Lake and surrounds. Based on anecdotal evidence, not all who sleep in the open are homeless. The low wages builders pay (and which homeowners inadvertently or knowingly endorse) to construction workers mean that in order to conserve their limited wages some workers opt to not travel home each day. This issue was raised at a workshop on displaced people I attended at Marks Park in June 2016, before the local government elections in August of that year, with the then councillor for Ward 87, Amanda Forsythe, and others.

word he was called more frequently than by his name. It was here he slept when the drenching summer rains came. A bricklayer had given him the key on the understanding he kept it between them, and so Kabelo left the site each afternoon and then returned once darkness had fallen deeply, walking the short distance from the lake back to the house when the only the sound was his footfalls.

Kabelo had an eye for detail — with a glance across a newly laid floor he could identify which board was the source of the error that had resulted in the boards being improperly laid. He was also known for his meticulous bricklaying and had passed on his skills to many youngsters. It was this that had made him almost walk off the job several times.

He sat on the stony ground eating his meal before any one else arrived to start work for the day. He, once again, wished he could stand up and walk north and keep walking until he was home. He had asked a few years ago, on one of his first jobs, how one became a bricklayer or carpenter — no, not how do you lay bricks or work with wood, he knew how to do that — but how one got work as a bricklayer or as a carpenter. He knew the pay would be better. There was a silence among the men he sat with around a fire. Maybe a disbelieving silence, he thinks now, that he didn't know that he couldn't be a bricklayer or a carpenter, not by profession. And so he taught, as he been told to, young white men who were looking for a trade to lay bricks or work with wood so they could marry and afford to live in well built homes, like this one.

The house was close to completion, the walls built, the ventilation bricks with intricate designs installed above the internal doorways, and the pressed ceilings in place after the hot, sweaty, sweary days it took to install them. One of his last jobs was to fix the architraves to the doorways — two-inch-wide and one-inch-thick panels of patterned wood — and then to hang nine doors. [32]

[32] While Hubbard House was built in 1911, it is worth comparing the many intricate design details that were included compared to the mass low-cost housing built in South Africa from the 1950s, the most common being the NE 51/6 design with four rooms. Sikakane in *Window on Soweto* writes of the poor-quality houses that had no bathrooms (they were not allowed to be added) and internal doors. "The inmates were left to finish at their own cost the plastering of walls, the erection of ceilings and filling of gaps on brick walls and window panes." (Sikakane, Page 23) It is also likely that had Hubbard House been built shortly after the First World War, as many homes in Parkview were, it would not have had so many decorative elements, as the cost of building materials, much of which was imported, surged during the war years. Hartdegen, P. 1988. *Our Building Heritage*, Johannesburg: Ryll's Publishing Company. (Pages 122 -123)

Kabelo walked through the empty house one early morning, he stood in the passage watching the sunlight pouring through the glass-panelled front door, the reds, greens and blues of the coloured glass casting patterns on a wall and a section of the floor. It was summer now and already hot, but the rooms were cool and quiet. Then he walked out the house and began the long walk on winding roads to the room he rented [33] to rest for a few days, before returning to find work in this suburb or another one nearby, where more houses were being built as the white city marched north.

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Jane knew that with the additional large rooms of their new home a great deal of her time would be spent managing the house. Henry wanted the garden to be the best in the neighbourhood. What neighbourhood, she thought. The area was still largely open plots. She had not voiced her reservations to Henry, with the exception of her unhappiness over the house's location so close to the lake. It was too late, she knew even when he had shown her the site, to back out of the purchase. But when she pointed out how cold it would be in winter he had grudgingly agreed to two additional fireplaces, bringing the total to four. Still, the largest fireplace was in the dining room, where Henry had told her he planned to sit after dinner parties with other men, smoking their pipes and drinking brandy, while the ladies retired to the smaller sitting room. Like he was some mining magnate, she thought but never said. And although she got what she wanted, two more fireplaces also meant two more to clean — that only became apparent later.

A few days after the move Jane was dusting the small sitting room that faced onto the front garden. Through one of the bay windows she watched Henry walking around his new house on one of his inspections. He paced up and down and every now and then looked up at the house. She joined him in the garden. Together they stood, looking at the front facade of their new home. It was elevated above the ground on a stone base and the curve of the front steps led to the wrap-around veranda and front door, which was recessed into a small alcove. The red bricks and stone glowed in the morning sun. The veranda had a low wall with five

[33] Kabelo Lekota may have rented a back room in a working-class white suburb, such as Bertrams or Brixton, where many white homeowners, disregarding that these were "white areas", generated extra income through rentals. "Johannesburg the Segregated City" published on South African History Online. 29 March 2011, updated 27 February 2019. https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/johannesburg-segregated-city Accessed 01/02/2020

columns supporting a small slope of roof that shaded it. Above the bay window were wood panels and on the apex of the pitched roof was a decorative spire.[34]

Jane left Henry sitting on the veranda reading the paper while she went inside to get on with lunch. As she cooked she made a mental note of the many things she needed to organise —the coal delivery being one — and with only two stores nearby that meant taking the tram into town frequently to get supplies.[35] When she had complained to Henry about the constant travelling back and forth to town, he looked up at her from the book he was reading and pointed out that the tram stop [36] near the lake was just two blocks from the house. She had not mentioned it again.

It took only a few weeks before Jane complained of the furnace that was the kitchen, especially in the late afternoons while she was preparing dinner. The west sun poured into the room, made worse with heat from the stove that was kept going all day. Jane had realised, when Henry had balked at the additional cost of building a veranda off the kitchen to shield it from the sun, how stretched they were financially. That, and his tarrying over the decision to employ someone to help her. She had expected it. What was the boy's room for then, she had asked in one of their now frequent arguments. They had both looked, simultaneously, at the bell box above the pantry door. Jane realised then why he hadn't wanted the bell system installed — he had not planned for there to be a servant for her to call by the pull of the cord from either one of the two bedrooms, the sitting room or the dining room. She still remembered his tart words when she had insisted on the bell system, saying to her the house was not a 20-roomed mansion on Parktown Ridge. He didn't have an answer to the question about the boy's room. But he did take the toilet bucket out to the lane each evening and in the

[34] Plans for residence on stand 123 Park View for HB Hubbard, ESQ by John Adams Architect. 13/4/1911

[35] The Hubbards would have moved into Hubbard House towards the end of 1911 or in 1912 depending on when the house was finished. Given that the suburb of Parkview was still fairly sparsely populated it is possible there were only one or two stores. According to Cynthia Kros in her book *A Lovely Spirit Here*, published for the centenary of Parkview junior and senior schools, by 1918 there were only four stores on Tyrone Avenue: Norman's Butchery, Rankin's Dairy, Parkview Stores, owned by Mr Mall, who also operated the boats at Zoo Lake, and Mickey Pontas, which may be have been a cafe. Kros, C. 2017. *A Lovely Spirit Here*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media. (Page 21)

[36] Spit, T (revised by Patton, B). 1976. *Johannesburg Tramways*. London: The Eight Railway Transport League. https://issuu.com/lostjohannesburg/docs/johannesburg_tramways (Pages 29 – 30). Accessed 7/02/2020

morning before work brought in the clean one left by the night soil men.[37] His solution for the hot kitchen was to plant a mulberry tree near the window and with the waste water from the kitchen sink running into a furrow near it the tree grew rapidly. The next spring Jane was able to watch from the kitchen window birds gorging themselves on the fruit.

Her day started with feeding the three chickens, and twice a week she raked the ground in their run, leaving their droppings in a corner of the garden where they could mature before she used them as manure. Henry collected the eggs soon after he woke up. She laundered small items of clothing, undergarments and such, to get them up in the sun to dry before any late-afternoon thunderstorms. She travelled into town only once a week; her household budget was tight and with the tomatoes and marrows yielding she didn't need to buy fresh vegetables as frequently. Jane knew Henry didn't like the dust that coated every surface, and so an hour or so before he was due home, she set to dusting the windowsills and the tops of the skirting boards, the mantelpiece and occasional tables in the sitting room, the hall table were the post was left and his chair on the veranda. She swept and mopped the floors and brushed the rugs. Then once again it was approaching dinnertime. Henry liked to eat early so he could sit on the front veranda afterwards, watching the water of the lake turn dark as the sun set and listening to the ducks and geese squawking as they settled for the night.

When she could no longer bear the perpetual dusting and polishing, Jane grabbed her hat, put on her boots, and walked. Many houses were being built, yet there were still areas where cattle grazed. [38] She walked there looking for the wild flowers and butterflies she had read about in the books she kept in the leaded-glass bookcase in her sitting room.

Jane was well aware Henry wanted children. But no child came and she wondered, as she lay awake at night, what this big house that required so much work was for. On one hot night with the curtains and windows open and the light from a full moon casting a grey glow

[37] Hubbard House was not connected to a waste water or sewerage system until 1936. City of Johannesburg Council Public Health Department plans for waste water and sewage connection to Erf 123. March 1936. There was a bucket system to dispose of sewage. Night soil men collected buckets placed in service lanes between the houses in Parkview.

[38] In the 1910s a section of land from the current Selkirk Road in Parkview towards what is now the Parkview Golf Course was a plantation where cattle grazed. This is according to Douglas Powrie, whose recollections of the area are included in *A Lovely Spirit Here*. (Kros, Page 21)

into the room, she looked at their wedding photo hanging on the picture rail [39] next to a picture of Henry's aged parents and wondered if she had made the right choice, or if it had even been a choice. There were no photos displayed of her family. Those she kept in a small box at the back of a shelf. There weren't many anyway, and they weren't the kind of pictures you displayed, or least that is what Jane thought. When she did look at them she thought their humble beginnings were obvious, in the hardness in their faces. She had never told Henry where she had come from — that her grandmother had worked as a maid, cleaning other people's homes.[40]

One Friday a year or so after they had moved in, as Jane polished the furniture, she sat down for a moment in a chair by the window of her sitting room. It overlooked the front veranda, the front garden and the road beyond that. Two women were walking, they stopped in front of her house to look at it. Once they had walked on, she went into the garden and also looked at her house. The lawn had taken, shrubs she had planted had grown quickly with the heat and rain, and the seeds Henry had ordered had grown into tall, erect plants flowering in pinks, reds and yellows. Jane went inside and found the gardening book Henry had given her and spent the afternoon in her sitting room reading, and when she tired of that she looked up at the patterned ceilings, taking a moment to follow the curves and lines.

It was the neighbours who had changed Jane's view of the house, and likewise the people next door changed Henry's mind about house help. Jane noticed him noticing the

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[39] The picture rail, along with carved architraves, high skirting boards, pressed-steel ceilings, stained-glass windows and fireplaces with decorative mantels are indicative of the aesthetic comfort of middle-class homes such as Hubbard House. These features were over and above the spacious rooms, and the amenities such as a pantry and store, and verandas that helped to keep the house and its residents cool. There were also services such as the night soil men and coal, milk and vegetable deliveries and a laundry service.

[40] Domestic work in the early 19th century offered poor white women a stepping stone into more respectable society. That was if they headed to South Africa to work in the homes of wealthy settlers in the Cape — leaving Britain, where jobs were scarce. Enslin-Payne, S. "Work that offered escape now gives little security", published in Business Times (Sunday Times) on 25/06/2017. https://www.businesslive.co.za/bt/opinion/2017-06-24-samantha-enslin-payne-work-that-offered-escape-now-gives-little-security/ Accessed 5/03/2020. This column was based in part on Shireen Ally's book *From Servants to Workers: South African Domestic Workers and the Democratic State*, where she discussed the stepping stone domestic service provided for working-class white women. The privileges they gained were passed down from one generation to another. But for Black women, domestic service has seldom been a stepping stone to better prospects. Ally, S. 2009. *From Servants to Workers: South African Domestic Workers and the Democratic State*, London: Cornell University Press.

man[41] they employed as he polished their veranda. They had a clear view of each other's homes over a low fence that marked out their respective territories.

Ezekiel [42] moved into the back room at Hubbard House. He weeded the vegetable patch, cleaned the chicken run, took the night soil bucket out to the lane and brought the clean pail inside, kept the kitchen stocked with coal and cleaned out ash from the oven and fireplaces. Ezekiel also cut the lawn and trimmed its edges so Henry could sit on the veranda looking onto the verdant green.

The curtains in the bedroom were drenched from the rain that had been swept in through the open windows by gusts of wind. Jane had been out walking when the storm broke, and with the sky a clear, solid deep blue when she left, she had not closed the windows. The wooden frames of the windows had swollen in any case from the summer rain and she knew, after six years in the house, they didn't close properly until the dry winter had set in. She herself was wet and muddy. Her boots were caked with clumps of soil from the sand roads [43] that traversed the suburb that she had been walking on when caught in the storm. Now she saw that one of the stained-glass panels of the window had been shattered by a hailstone, the remnant of it a small icy puddle on the floorboard. That was another cost to add to the growing expenses of maintaining the house. She inspected the coloured glass in the bay windows in the dining room and sitting room, which were thankfully intact.

The storm had rushed off as quickly as it had arrived. Jane left her shoes outside for Ezekiel to clean. She returned inside to get away from the glare of the hot west sun to attend

[41] In Johannesburg's early years Black men and white women were employed as domestic help. (Ginsburg, Page 6)

[42] I have not given Ezekiel a surname to draw attention to the common occurrence of white employers not knowing their staff's full names. Kros writes in *A Lovely Spirit Her*e of a man named Alfred who worked at Parkview Junior school. A headmistress said: "One cannot think of the school during those 26 years [of her tenure] without thinking of Alfred." Yet, Kros continues: "All we know of Alfred is his first name. The school authorities … did not find it important to record such details. Alfred died suddenly at school one afternoon at the end of July 1946." (Kros, Page 34)

[43] Most roads (up to about mid-1910) were sand without pavements, curbs or drainage, according to Marc Latilla's article "Short history of trams in Johannesburg" published on his website Johannesburg 1912 on 1 June 2013. https://johannesburg1912.wordpress.com/ Last accessed 09/02/2020.

to the stains on her dress left by the red clay of the roads, clay that she cursed again.[44] [45] The stains were too difficult to remove, she decided, and she left it with the soiled linen to be collected by Rand Steam,[46] [47] before she stepped into the deep bath she had run for herself. As she soaked, her feet barely reaching the end of the bath, her mind drifted at the drip-drip of the tap and the click-click of the clock in the hall. Dressed, she wandered into the hall and flicked through the letters she had left on the table after clearing the postbox earlier in the day. Then she sat in the dining room, at an armchair set into the recess of the large bay window, with a book on her lap, watching the dust motes drift lazily in a shaft of sunlight.

[44] According to the book *Like it Was. 1887 - 1987. The Star 100 Years in Johannesburg,* in the 1910s white women in Johannesburg followed European fashions. "In a town where the streets were often dust or mud the long dresses around the turn of the century would have been a nightmare to launder." Clarke, J. (editor) 1987. *Like it Was, 1887 - 1987, The Star 100 Years in Johannesburg,* Johannesburg: An Argus Publication. (Pages 42 - 43 and 65).

[45] By the 1910s drawings of white women's fashion show looser-fitting dresses that no longer overemphasised the waist and bust, but their hems still swept the ground. Joyce, P. (editor) 1981. *South Africa's Yesterdays*. Cape Town: The Reader's Digest Association of South Africa

[46] *Rand Steam Laundries – Archival and Historical Study*. 22 April 2014. A heritage assessment by PGS Heritage on the Rand Steam laundry site for Impendulo Design Architects. This site was redeveloped as a shopping centre called Rand Steam. https://randsteamcentre.co.za/assets/randsteam_heritage.pdf Last accessed 09/02/20

[47] The study referenced in footnote 46 says Rand Steam and other laundry services were able to capture a large part of the laundry market when the council removed the AmaWasha, Zulu men who provided a laundry service for Johannesburg residents from 1890 to 1906. In 1896 there were over 7,000 washing licences issued, but by 1904 this had dropped to just under 800. During this time the washermen were at risk of being moved or were moved, with the council citing hygiene as a reason for removal. The study says, referencing Van Onselen, Callinicos and Brodie, that "the economic fall of the AmaWasha brought about by the enforced removal of their washing sites to ones far away from their markets in residential Johannesburg was an orchestrated move to assist the establishment and expansion of white-owned steam laundries across Johannesburg". This is another example of how economic opportunities were perpetually limited for Black South Africans.

1961

LYDIA

Lydia Sebola was standing at the empty kitchen sink looking through the window into the back garden watching a small bird on the mulberry tree. She wiped the already clean surface around the sink.[48] She kept an ear out for her employer coming down the passage. One advantage of wooden floorboards: they could not be walked on quietly, well not by those who lived in the house. She had worked in this house since the family moved in almost three years ago[49] and knew their routine — it determined on what days she could clean the windows and when she had to do the ironing.[50] Likewise, Lydia knew how to walk softly across the floorboards in the worn slippers she worked in, keeping her presence and her work discreet. This was especially the case in the mornings when the children were at school and the madam listened to the radio in her sitting room while knitting. At eleven o'clock she rang for her tea and then read, or if she had friends visiting they sat in the front sitting room or on the

[48] The work of Rebecca Ginsburg, an associate professor at the University of Illinois and an architectural historian, was an important resource for this essay. Ginsburg, R. 2011. *At Home With Apartheid: The Hidden Landscapes of Domestic Service in Johannesburg.* Charlottesville & London: University of Virginia Press. Her book explores the experiences of domestic workers employed in white middle-class homes between 1960 and 1975 with a specific focus on the physical spaces in which they lived and worked. Ginsburg writes of the many challenges domestic workers faced in navigating a space in which they were needed but not wanted. She explores how they had to adopt ways to be unobtrusive as they went about their work in a place that was often hostile and oppressive.

[49] After H. Bruce Hubbard built Hubbard House there were seven subsequent owners. By 1938 a Mrs V.E. Kirkman was the owner. Between then and some time in the 1950s a Mrs D.L. Desmet became the owner. It was bought by Mr R.H. Carvolth in 1963 and sold to Mrs V.A. Ireland (neé Carvolth) in 1979. In 1995 it was sold to P.J. Mary and L.A. Prins. It was bought in 2007 by Ms L. Long and sold in 2015 to Mrs S.L. Enslin-Payne.

[50] The staff accommodation at Hubbard House was demolished after 2007. For the purposes of this essay I have drawn on my memories of the domestic rooms I have seen in homes in Johannesburg, both in the 1970s as a child and more recently — many have not changed much. More importantly, I drew from Ernest Cole's book *House of Bondage*, in which a series of photographs show domestic workers, who he does not name, in their rooms, working in the houses where they were employed or sitting on pavements in white suburbs. (Cole, Pages 70 - 81)

veranda. Both had to be cleaned before any guests arrived or the madam decided to use either space, and teacups and cake plates removed when they left.

There was a bell system above the pantry door that Lydia had to listen for. As soon as she heard the ring she looked at the numbers — one to four — to know which room to head to. It was an inefficient system because she wasn't always in the kitchen and so the madam called her, sometimes from where she was seated, and when she did Lydia sometimes pretended she couldn't hear, forcing her to get up. Lydia knew the effort of rising and walking down the passage to find her often wasn't worth it.

The bird was nibbling on the mulberries, hopping from branch to branch as it made its way up the tree — or was it looking for the insects that gravitated towards the fruit, Lydia wondered. She helped herself to the fruit, as well as the apricots, peaches and plums that were still to come, even though she had been told not to. [51] She had seen so much of the fruit fall to the ground before she or the gardener was told to clean up the rotting mess. In any case, no one was around when she opened the house at a quarter to six to make their tea and prepare breakfast. It was then, while she set their tea tray, that she had an extra cup of tea, not counted as part of her daily ration. [52]

Once she had delivered the tea tray to the master bedroom and opened their curtains, she woke the children and ushered them into the kitchen for breakfast. The school was nearby, so the madam emerged, still in her nightdress and dressing gown, to kiss them goodbye as they charged out the front door.[53]

Besides the benefit of being an early warning system, the floorboards required endless sweeping and polishing, like the front veranda that Lydia had to frequently polish while on

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[51] Domestic workers were not passive. Ginsburg recounts how some of the domestic workers she interviewed subverted the space in which they worked and lived, such as by eating food that was out of bounds. One woman said: "The whole house belonged to us when they were not around." (Ginsburg, Page 158).

[52] Ginsburg writes: "House rules did more than inform the quality of Africans' movements through various parts of the house, they also restricted interactions with objects of the house ... Workers were not supposed to use things of the house for their own enjoyment, not stop to admire paintings, to read books, to eat from their plates, to use the telephone ... The people who made these rules understood at some level that is in part through the nature of our interaction with particular material things that our status is achieved." (Ginsburg, Page 145)

[53] In Sindiwe Magona's collection of short stories *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night*, a character comments: "Mornings, see all the women in their uniforms taking white children to school. What a sight: until you ask yourself who takes the black child to school." Mangona, S. 1991. *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night*, Cape Town: David Philip Africasouth New Writing (Page 44)

her hands and knees.[54] Each morning she cleaned the sitting room first. The sweeping required moving heavy furniture and kneeling to brush underneath sofas and the many side tables, occasional tables and a coffee table. The bathroom was cleaned twice a day, once after the children had left for school, when Lydia picked up wet towels and rinsed the basin, and again after the madam had taken her bath. The kitchen required constant wiping, washing of dishes and cooking.

Lydia knew not to rush anything, keeping herself busy or looking busy, [55] not only so she wasn't given additional work if the madam saw her loafing, as she called it, but so there was work to pass the time in the long, weary afternoon and early evening. She missed her home and children most then, as the shadows lengthened and she began to prepare the evening meal for the family she worked for. While a roast with sprigs of rosemary she had cut from the bush in the garden was in the oven, Lydia brought in the laundry from the washing line, folded it neatly and stored it in the press to be ironed the next day, then watered the flowerpots outside the kitchen door and fetched the children's toys from the garden. If there was still time weighing on her, she sat on a crate on the back veranda to polish shoes before putting them back in the cupboards. There was always something to do.

As Lydia finished off the meal, the youngest child ran into the kitchen and spontaneously flung his arms around her; she patted him and then gently pushed him away — she knew that like with his older brother and sister she would be invisible in a few years. She

[54] Ginsburg writes of how the cleaning of verandas by domestic workers — "rubbed to a deep shine" — enabled their employers to uphold "neighbourhood expectations" of respectability. (Ginsburg, Page 66). Jonathan Cane in *Civilising Grass: The Art of the Lawn on the South African Highveld* writes that "respectability is an outward-facing, communal concept". Cane, J. 2019. *Civilising Grass: The Art of the Lawn on the South African Highveld.* Johannesburg: Wits University Press (Page 83)

[55] Ginsburg writes: "Experienced workers measured their exertions as best they could, trying to maintain a steadiness in themselves despite external fluctuations … to establish in themselves an internal rhythm that could not be disturbed by madam's orders or the children's cries. Managing one's movements in this fashion was one way of compensating for having to hold oneself ever ready for the calls of others, of having literally to wait upon and for whites." (Ginsburg, Page 79). This was aimed, as Ginsburg says, to protect themselves from the ructions of the house, but also to obscure their own inner turmoil, the longing for their children and to ensure they did not get too close to the children they were employed to look after. One woman Ginsburg interviewed said: "The children I work for, I do not see. Soon I will be a stranger to them." (Ginsburg, Page 100)

thought of her own children, who she had not seen for eight months — it was eight weeks before she was due to go home.[56] [57] [58]

It was a brief respite when Lydia lay down on her bed at 8 o'clock. She did so before cooking her own dinner, and she might not even cook this evening, she thought, as she had not yet had a chance to clean the pot she used last night for cooking. But as soon as thoughts of her home and children came, she rose and busied herself, first sweeping the floor and then reading the days-old newspapers that were to be thrown out. Then she drifted off, never sleeping deeply, waiting for Bheki's knock on the door.[59] He came each night and Lydia knew it was because he had nowhere else to go. He brought food. More than that, she enjoyed the comfort of him as they slept, the pressure of his heavy arm resting on her hip, helping to ease the tension in her body. She had had to stay awake, keeping an eye on the lights in the house, following the progress of the family's evening as they moved from room to room and then locked up for

[56] Cole in *House of Bondage* reflects on the relationship between white children and the Black women who looked after them. "But even that relationship is doomed. Children watch how they treat the black 'boys' and 'girls' and soon the youngest realize that they can get away with the same conduct ... The lessons that they learn are carried into the streets, into office and factory." (Cole, Page 73)

[57] The concept of home for domestic workers was still very much where their children were, as Ginsburg says: "They imagined, no matter how long their sojourn, they would eventually return home. Especially for women with children, who remained behind, to believe otherwise would have been incomprehensible." (Ginsburg, Page 35) One woman said, referring to her workplace: "If you call this your home, then you are lost.." (Ginsburg, Page 57) I would add this was also due to apartheid legislation that meant there was little scope for a mother to relocate her family to Johannesburg and make a permanent home there. Domestic workers also knew the tenuous connection to the room they stayed in, as they could be dismissed suddenly.

[58] It was not only mothers who felt the loss of their children. Children experienced great anguish at their mothers' absence. Don Mattera, in his book *Memory is the Weapon*, reflects back on a time when he was a child and his mother was working as a domestic worker, writing that "she spent all her adolescence and adult life giving to the children of her employers things that I should have received". (Mattera, Page 2) and "My mother visited me on certain Thursdays, when like many other domestic workers she was allowed a day off. I have pleasant memories of those visits. She would bring me new clothes and toys and sweets. And always, when it came to parting, tears failed to soothe the deep longing and love I had for her." (Mattera, Page 30) Mattera, D First published in 1987 by Ravan Press. This edition, 2009, *Memory is the Weapon*, Johannesburg: African Perspectives Publishing

[59] Ginsburg writes of the "strong sense of mutual interdependence [that] … pervaded the networks of aid that workers built for themselves among the avenues of Johannesburg's middle-class suburbs". (Ginsburg, Page 51) It was not only lovers, but also family and friends and sometimes strangers who were sheltered in domestic rooms, until they had found work themselves.

the night. Lydia then called into the night, the soft chirruping sound of a cricket, to let Bheki know it was safe. He now knew the family's habits, waiting in the shadows of the tall trees that lined the street watching until the house was all in darkness and it was safe to come to her room.

When Bheki stopped visiting, the quietness, once again, weighed on her. But a cousin was due to arrive soon — a message had been relayed to her that she needed a place to stay and help in finding a job. Still, she wasn't sure when, and the nights and weekends now seemed longer than in the days of Bheki. [60]

Sunday, the one day she didn't work, was an opportunity for Lydia to rest if she didn't visit her sister in Meadowlands. She had hoped, when her sister had moved there, that she too could get a house and find work in town where she wasn't at the beck and call of this family, but her husband was gone. He occasionally emerged for a few weeks back home, and she heard about it eventually when a family member passed by. Her sister's husband had the permit to the house and Lydia knew she couldn't get one. [61] In any case, Lydia decided after several visits to Meadowlands — with the stretches of identical houses along dusty roads that

[60] Ginsburg writes that besides the interior of the rooms, in which domestic workers lived, being of an inferior standard to the house in which they worked, the rooms built at the back of properties were sometimes also hidden away, behind a wall or shrubbery, in a backyard serving to reinforce domestic workers' "social invisibility". (Ginsburg, Page 4, 139) Domestic workers were also "hidden" in their uniforms of an overall, apron and doek. (Cole, Page 73) And it was also the full scope of their lives that was not noticed, wilfully ignored by employers. Cole writes "out of sight and out of mind" when it came to the family commitments domestic workers had. (Cole, Page 71).

Yet it was this invisibility that also enabled Cole to take photographs of domestic workers' rooms and of the interior of their employers' homes. While taking care to not be noticed, Cole writes "by and large I was able to enter a great many households and interview a number of servants". (Cole, Page 71) And it was this invisibility that also enabled domestic workers to conduct their own surveillance of their employers and the neighbours in order to use their rooms as a refuge for newcomers to the city.

[61] Only married men could be issued a housing permit. (Sikakane, Page 25)

As a result, women living in cities who could pursue economic opportunities that enabled them to remain with their children needed to be married and this might have meant remaining in an unhappy marriage. Even for women who were happily married the economic opportunities they could find were often not in the same area as their partner's work, leaving parents with no choice but to take employment that resulted in a seperation from each other and their children.

turned to muck in the rain, and the overbearing smog — that she would only visit every few months.[62]

Sundays could stretch interminably. Lydia lay on her bed looking around her room.[63] It could do with a tidy. The newspaper Lydia had used to cover the bare cement floor was now shredded in places and she needed to re-cover the floor, now that winter was coming.[64] She gazed up out the high window [65] — so high, her madam said, it didn't warrant curtains.

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[62] Meadowlands was built for those who were forcibly removed from Sophiatown in the late 1950s. Joyce Sikakane's *A Window on Soweto* was an important resource for the manuscript. Sikakane details the many aspects of life and the extreme hardships of those living in Soweto during apartheid. The concepts underpinning mass low-cost housing is explored in Clive Chipkin's book *Johannesburg Style Architecture and Society 1880s - 1960s.* Chipkin says: "There was never any doubt that the programme was not merely about shelter, bricks and services. It was specifically about power, hegemony and population control." Chipkin, C. 1993. *Johannesburg Style- Architecture & Society 1880s – 1960s*. Cape Town: David Phillip

[63] According to the 1911 original plans for Hubbard House the property had a Boy's Room of eight feet (about 2.43 metres) by nine feet (2.74 metres), next door to a Coals Room of six feet by nine feet. Adjoining the staff room was a room of five feet by nine feet, which notes from a previous owner said was a tool room. There was no indication in the original plans that there was a bathroom. This ties in with what Cole writes in *House of Bondage*: "Only the newest homes … built with apartheid in mind, provide cold water showers and decent toilets. In most homes the servant must wash herself in the same bucket she uses for washing the floor." (Cole, Page 72). In Hubbard House a bathroom was added to the staff room in 1963 using the tool room, implying that until then there had been no bathroom.

[64] These staff rooms, where many women lived for decades, still exist, some, it seems, in their original condition. They were cramped, had bare cement floors, whitewashed brick (with no plastering), a small window, and the poor ventilation and lack of natural light that comes with that. The toilet next door (if there was one) would likely be what is referred to as a long drop, with no actual toilet to sit on, and this room doubled up as a makeshift bathroom or shower with cold water despite hot water being available in the main house a few metres away. There were no proper kitchen facilities. These rooms mostly did not have electricity during the 1960s. (Ginsburg, Page 11) The bare bones accommodation provided for domestic workers was a manifestation of government policy during apartheid that black workers in a city such as Johannesburg were not permanent residents. Their presence was regarded as temporary and therefore by extension their accommodation could be makeshift. This perception disregarded that some domestic workers worked and lived for decades at the same house. The consequence of the profound discomfort and uncertainty domestic workers experienced in their live-in accommodation and employment includes that they were unable to fully experience making a home for and with their loved ones, besides when they were able to make a short annual journey home. Even so, within these extreme constraints many women invested in their children's education and homes.

[65] Cole refers to domestic rooms atop blocks of flats in Johannesburg, known as Locations in the Sky, as cell-like rooms. This was my thought (during several tours of Constitution Hill that I did while writing the novel) of

She reached for her tea in a mug on an upturned crate she used as a bedside table and sipped slowly, marking the passing of time as she lay there on her own. The mattress sagged and when the ache in her back became too much she rose, deciding to go for a walk. She looked in the wardrobe for a cardigan. As she closed the door it fell off its hinge.[66] Up the road

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the striking correlation between the high windows of prison cells at Number Four and at the Women's Prison and the high windows in staff rooms. The Locations in the Sky were the source of much discussion among white employers when the government planned to relocate out of the city black residents living in roof top staff rooms. Carr writes in *Soweto: Its creation, life and decline* of white residents of Killarney who strongly resisted the relocation of staff. "It was common to find that the employers, often only two people in the family, demanded the presence day and night of a cook, a housemaid, a chauffeur and sometimes a nursemaid." The regulations were relaxed for infirm employers, "but the situation became farcical because it appeared practically every resident in Killarney was bedridden, crippled or permanently incapacitated and unable to exist without the full-time presence of a number of domestic workers." Carr, W.J.P. 1990. *Soweto: Its creation, life and decline*. Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations. (Pages 68 - 69)

This claim of infirmity was no doubt, in many cases, so that white employers could still be served tea in bed, which would have been impossible if an employee had to travel long distances to work. This is just one example of white residents considering their own comfort rather than the negative impact, both in terms of the additional cost incurred for transport and the long travelling times to and from work, such a relocation would have had on people who lived in Locations in the Sky. And over and above this it highlights again the acceptance by most white people that staff should live in small rooms with inadequate facilities away from their families.

[66] Ginsburg writes: "During interviews in their rooms, workers pointed out elements of their interior landscapes that they thought deserved my attention or illustrated their points — paint cans that supported a raised bed (under which a person could hide), rain-damaged roofs that insulted their pride, examples of embroidery they had created to sustain a sense of accomplishment." (Ginsburg, Page 20). Ginsburg points out that white middle-class homes in the 1960s were often filled with new furniture as homeowners enjoyed the benefits of the economic boom in South Africa. (Ginsburg, Page 165) In contrast domestic workers were often given cast-off, damaged items. Clothes were hung from nails on a wall and a crate used for a chair. In older homes damp proofing was not a standard requirement for domestic quarters (Ginsburg, Pages 57 - 58) and so they were often musty — unlike in Hubbard House as per the council plans referenced earlier. But beyond the different sizes of these two homes (the main house and the domestic workers' room) and the vastly different levels of comfort and resources available, the uses of these spaces also differed . The white family had full access to the house and garden and could use it for leisure activities which they had the time to pursue, given the labour provided by a domestic worker. (Ginsburg, Chapter 6)

friends who worked in nearby homes, were sitting on the pavement chatting.[67] [68] [69] She joined them and the hours she spent with them passed quickly and restored her spirits, though briefly, because the next morning there was a litany of complaints when the madam walked into the kitchen. [70]

[67] As mentioned previously Ginsburg writes of the social invisibility of domestic workers even though by mid-century they were the principal users of suburbs' public spaces. They were not seen, or if they were, their presence was considered by white residents as comforting — a nanny with a white baby in a pram or on an errand to the store. (Ginsburg, Page 52) Their presence confirmed the social order for white South Africans.

[68] Social life was limited for domestic workers. Ginsburg says domestic workers "were a common sight in city parks, which offered a safe and relatively comfortable meeting spot". (Ginsburg, Page 116). She adds that parks "offered at least relief and freedom from overbearing surveillance" that domestic workers were subjected to while working. (Ginsburg, Page 84).

Yet while socialising in parks domestic workers needed to remain vigilant, as they were at risk of police checks for pass books. And white residents also monitored their activities. So they were invisible on one level, if they were doing what domestic workers should do "downcast eyes, a pleasant demeanour and submissive gestures" (Ginsburg, Page 52), according to whites expectations, but there were consequences if they deviated from this. One woman, Ginsburg interviewed, lost two jobs due to her dress, while Cole says "the girl who is 'cheeky' enough to dress up is fired". (Cole, Page 73). These are some examples of how domestic workers were policed in both private and public spaces.

[69] Domestic workers' limited time off meant they could often not visit friends or family elsewhere in the city due to the long travelling times, and the limited bus services they were permitted to use. (Cole, Page 72; Ginsburg, Pages 79 - 84)

[70] Cole writes: "White homes are the crucible of racism in South Africa ... White women, particularly, spend hours conferring among themselves … 'When madam returns from her tea date,' they say, 'you can be sure of two things: She will be in a terrible temper and she will have a brand-new recipe for handling her servants.' Pay is the main issue for employees but employers consider bed, food and the wages paid as sufficient. "I feed you, I house you. You have no other responsibilities, so what more do you need?" The responsibilities of children are "literally a case of out of sight, out of mind". (Cole, Pages 70 - 71)

2020
SAMANTHA

On the wall in the sitting room in Hubbard House is a photograph. It was first hung in the passage, taken down and stored in a cupboard, then reconsidered and is now displayed above the piano. And when this essay is finished it may be removed to a less prominent place, perhaps even in a drawer. The photograph, dated 1913, is of a grandfather of a family member and with his diary — on our bookshelf — and the book *Blow Blow the Winds of Change* [71] based on the diary published by his son, I know a lot about him. Born in 1869, he arrived at the port of Beira in Mozambique in 1894. Standing at the ship's rail as it docked, he writes: "It was glorious to be a young man in a young country, to feel that you and the land had a great future." [72]. He continues: "We had no fears of marching into that territory — we were white, we were armed and we were confident that no harm would befall us" [73] — showing no awareness of the severe harm he (and other white men and women) would inflict over the course of the next century and a quarter in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Kenya and South Africa.

He was a young white man, with no apparent formal training in any field, yet in his five years in Rhodesia he was able to find work as a policeman, a landscape gardener, a gold digger, a draper's assistant and an accountant.

As he grows older, his diary includes some reflections on those he had power over, yet these pricks to his conscience were trumped by what he considered was his duty to his employers. While he worked in Southern and East Africa he considered the position of those who were forced into work for colonial administrations and settlers. He writes: "If we were impressed to do work we disliked for pay we did not particularly need (especially as our wives would provide our food supplies) should we not leave our loads some nights and steal away." [74]

During the First World War in East Africa as a District Commissioner, his work included forcing chiefs, through fines of cattle, to send young men into conscription for the

[71] Payne, A. 1989, *Blow Blow the Winds of Change*. Johannesburg: Pens Editorial and Publishing Enterprises

[72] Payne, (Page 17)

[73] Payne, (Page 3)

[74] Payne, (Page 19)

colonial government. He writes: “I sympathised with them in my heart, although I have to twist their tails strongly to keep up our prestige and to make them and other tribes understand that the orders of the government must be obeyed.” [75] In one case, when headmen would not comply by sending young men into the colonial government’s service, as punishment he forced elderly chiefs to work in his garden. “I sent a number of the worst cases to Musoma, were they were employed at weeding my garden and keeping the station clean. It was rather a severe punishment for they were middle-aged or elderly men, not used to work of any kind. I kept them there for a couple of weeks and then sent them back.” [76]

In South Africa in 1918, he worked in the Government Native Labour Bureau that dispatched workers to mines. In the 1920s he became a magistrate in Ottoshoop in the then Transvaal. Like many white South Africans who expressed their apparent distaste for the status quo, he did not feel compelled to take it any further. But he did say this to his son: “Take warning, … Don’t join the service. Avoid an easy monotonous life, a monthly cheque and a pension ... Fight your own battle as a businessman, a professional man, a farmer or planter. You may fail, the world may give you hard knocks, but you may succeed and win great prizes and above all be your own master.” [77] Being your own master was an option for white men, and his words of caution to his son were likely not an indication that he regretted being an instrument of the oppressive governments he represented.

Almost 100 years after he penned those last lines of his diary, on 21 June 1927, I sit here considering him and his legacy, and that of Hubbard House filled with the furniture and mementos from other family members: the tea trolley and dining room table that was used in 43a Joubert Street Extension on Hospital Hill and family photo albums of black cardboard with photographs of picnics and beach excursions and swimming parties near small wooded waterfalls. These photos can easily be viewed less perceptibly than the photo of the man in the 1913 portrait. I don’t know what the young people sitting on a grassy bank next to a public swimming pool, the light catching the ripples of the water, thought of the fact that only white people like themselves were allowed to use this facility. Or whether a large family gathering, posing for a group photo in front of a suburban house, thought about how much work their leisure time created for the people working in that home.

[75] Payne, (Page 113)

[76] Payne, (Page 125)

[77] Payne, (Page 139)

These photo albums almost erase black South Africans — the fact that the trimmed edges of a lawn and the shaped hedges forming the backdrop for a luncheon party were tended to by a gardener or that there was someone waiting in the kitchen to wash the dishes once the guests had departed. [78]

But the people who worked for these white family members are not entirely hidden. In one album a series of photos include a black woman, presumably a domestic worker. She is holding a white baby at two weeks, at four weeks, at eight weeks. There is a photo of two small white children sitting on deck chairs, the older girl of perhaps four years old reclines, a toddler crouches awkwardly in the chair next to her, and on the ground next to them sits a young black woman, presumably their carer, her face a blank. The youngest child was too young to have been able to sit by himself on the chair and so would have been lifted and placed there, perhaps by the photographer (their father?) who demarcated the children as having a higher status to the woman, who likely was instructed to take her place on the ground next to them.

There is one photo I struggled to decode. A young black woman dressed in smart clothes — a white dress, white stockings and black shoes — sits on a chair, with a white child astride a bicycle next to her. Behind her is a water tank and a small window (possibly a pantry or bathroom window) set into the corrugated iron side of a house. She is holding flowers, perhaps a posy. Could it have been her wedding day? And if so, why was the child dressed in casual summer clothes of shorts and a T-shirt and with a bicycle included in the photo? Did the child demand to be included, and the photographer, likely one of her parents, acquiesce? Or did the young woman ask the young child to be in the photo? Unlike the many other wedding parties pictured in these albums of white brides and grooms posing with the front façade of big and small houses behind them, this young woman's photo is taken in a backyard where a water tank was located, confirming her position in the household and the spaces she was permitted to occupy.

But elsewhere in Johannesburg in the 1940s and 1950s while my white family were conducting "respectable" lives in environs where the social order conformed to the white politics of the day, others were defining the city in their own way.

[78] Both Ginsburg in her book *At Home with Apartheid* and Jonathan Cane in his book *Civilising Grass* — both referenced above — explore the concept of hidden labour.

Lewis Nkosi in *Home and Exile*, [79] recollects his years working on Drum magazine where writers such Can Themba, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Casey Motsisi and Bloke Modisane were writing "grim stories of farm labour brutalities, police torture and township riots in a cool sober prose in which they permitted themselves the luxury of a laugh". [80]

They were defining their own use of space and defying the rules that tried to confine them by making themselves visible and heard. Nkosi writes: "Along Main Street we followed Can Themba. He weaved his supple body between white people and black people, from time to time gaily waving his arms at the city in a gesture that included astonished crowds of white people travelling home in the soft twilit evening. 'Ah, to rub my black jowl against the white cheek of Johannesburg!' Can Themba declaimed. In one hand he carried a huge volume consisting of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. He dodged traffic deftly, meandering through cars and crowds, hurrying, as I would see him hurry many times thereafter, to his beloved shebeen. "[81]

Nkosi writes: "The mood in South Africa of the fifties was not exactly one of impending doom. While it seemed that the white National Party Government was going from strength to strength, the opposition camp was also gathering in a bumper harvest of new recruits to the cause of racial justice and intellectual freedom. It was a time of infinite hope and possibility; it seemed not extravagant in the least to predict then that the Nationalist Government would soon collapse." [82] But Nkosi went into exile due to restrictions on his writing, leaving on an exit permit in 1960 (the year the ANC and PAC were banned) to take up a position at Harvard. He only returned 30 years later.[83]

Post apartheid, as I weigh up the legacy of the family man in the 1913 photograph that included dispatching workers to mines, I have on loan, on the coffee table in the study of Hubbard House, Cole's *House of Bondage* that includes a series of photographs of the terrible living and working conditions of mineworkers. On a recent trip to Gold Reef City, amid the fun and fanfare, I found a small room dedicated to the history of mine labour. One enlarged photograph shows mineworkers eating a meal. There are a few men looking directly at the camera. I look back at the young men who were far from home and trapped (mineworkers

[79] Nkosi, L. 1965. *Home and Exile*, London: Longmans (Pages 19 -20)

[80] Nkosi, (Page 11)

[81] Nkosi, (Pages 19 - 20)

[82] Nkosi, (Pages 22 - 23)

[83] SA History Online website. https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/lewis-nkosi Accessed 18/01/2020

signed contracts committing them to work on the mines for a set period of time [84]) in a job for which one of my family members may have recruited them.

So how do I reframe Hubbard House? There is no longer a dimly lit room with a bare lightbulb in the back garden, the neighbourhood schools teach all children, and there are laws that protect the rights of domestic workers. The house and suburb are no longer a place of exclusion as they were during the Union of South Africa and apartheid. Yet the economic inequality of the country persists. An undated photograph in Marc Latilla's book *Johannesburg Then and Now*,[85] taken from the Westcliff ridge, shows a section of Parkview, including Hubbard House. The photo was likely taken in the 1920s or 1930s. [86] By then, this section of the suburb was mostly built up. It is clear this was a well-heeled community: electricity had been installed, several homes have two or more chimneys, and there are varying styles and designs reflecting the agency and ownership of those who had them built. A search on Google Maps [87] shows the same area (although from a more elevated angle) in 2020 being equally well resourced: the homes are now substantially bigger and many have swimming pools. Likewise, Hubbard House expanded from the original six rooms, through extensions mostly done in the 1970s, to 14 rooms, including three bathrooms.

When we first viewed Hubbard House in the spring of 2014, we entered the house through the back door (the gate on the front door was broken) and once inside the kitchen we saw the remnants of the chimney under which a coal stove once stood and the bell system above the pantry door, disconnected. However, it was the pantry that prompted us, there and then, before we had ventured further, to buy the house.

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[84] Cole (Page 22)

[85] Latilla, M. and Panchia,Y. 2018. *Johannesburg Then and Now*. Cape Town: Struik Travel & Heritage, an imprint of Penguin Random House South Africa

[86] I estimate this photo was taken in the 1920s as the roads in Parkview are not yet tarred. Kathy Munro, in the article "What was Johannesburg like in 1931?" published on The Heritage Portal, writes: "Transport was key to Johannesburg's expansion. South African Railways in 1931 bought two new narrow gauge steam locomotives. But what really made a difference to Johannesburg was the coming of the automobile as it meant good tarred roads were a priority and the northern suburbs of bungalow-style houses with generous gardens could be developed in the thirties in Houghton, Saxonwold, Parkview, Parkwood."
http://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/what-was-johannesburg-1931 Accessed 15/02/2020

[87] https://www.google.com/maps/place/Crescent+Dr,+Westcliff,+Randburg,+2193/@-26.163661,28.027752,320a,35y,39.03t/data=!3m1!1e3!4m5!3m4!1s0x1e950c7a8b01206f:0x7a9494ada291bc43!8m2!3d-26.1674527!4d28.0269594 Accessed 15/02/2020

The pantry? What promise did it hold? It was evocative of a time when the large back garden would have a vegetable garden and fruit trees and a coal store, and in the pantry all sorts of supplies — bottled preserves and jars of biscuits — would have been stored in this well-resourced home. From the kitchen would have come the smell of a cake baking; and children would come running from the garden lured inside by the smell to see if they could lick the bowl. It had credentials, it was over 100 years old, and it had good bones — big rooms, high ceilings. And even with the house so neglected we were captivated by its easy charm.

But considering the house in the years we have lived here, I know now there is a lot resting on its bones. The worn wooden floorboards in the kitchen, with marks that I cannot scrub out, are a testament to the relentless work done by women over the past 109 years. Hubbard House would have been a place of sadness and bondage for the many who worked here, and before it was even occupied by the Hubbards, the people who built it never in their lifetime knew the comforts of such a home.

Parkview is no longer designated for whites only, the post office does not have a separate entrance and the nearby parks no longer have benches for *slegs blankes* (whites only). Except the houses are surrounded by high walls, topped by electric fences. Security vehicles patrol the streets and cameras on certain corners are soon to be installed — surveillance continues.

Jennifer Robinson writes in her essay "(Im)mobilizing space - dreaming of change": "White South Africans have enormous resources of repression at their disposal. These are no longer armoured vehicles, administrative sanctions and legal exclusions of apartheid. Rather they are private security arrangements around every home, the constant search for exclusive, safe, white neighbourhoods….White urban dreams are nightmares of anxiety, of danger and loss of self." [88]

This white anxiety manifests in many ways. One of which is the policing by whites of black people in neighbourhoods that are still predominately white, such as the white woman who lives across the road from Hubbard House. On one cold winter morning, she leant out the window of her flat and shouted at three black men standing in a small patch of wintery sunlight. She wanted them to move on, claiming the public pavement as her space. The men held their ground.

[88] Robinson, J. 1998 . "(Im)mobilizing space - dreaming of change". In *Blank_Architecture, apartheid and after*, Judin, H. and Vladislavic, I. (editors) Rotterdam: NAi Publishers. Essay D7.

Economically the exclusion is still apparent. Home ownership remains mostly white, Black gardeners continue to maintain the respectability of pavements, which are the new front façade of these houses as the high polish of a front stoep, concealed behind walls, can no longer be the benchmark of respectability. And when the pavements are not kept up to standard, there are declarations of despair on the neighbourhood WhatsApp group. Black domestic workers still tend to these middle-class homes and walk white children to and from school — it is also sometimes their own children they are walking to the same school.

The exclusions are in some ways more visible and in other ways less visible. The spatial planning of apartheid means most South Africans still live far from where they work and the inequality that was cemented during colonialism and apartheid remains prevalent with the unemployment rate among whites at 7% and among Africans at 32.4%. [89]

As P Wilkinson says: "The product — an archipelago of relentlessly impoverished 'suburbs' quarantined with their 'buffer zones' on the outer fringes of the 'white' towns and cities — today constitutes perhaps the most central material fact in the daily lives of a majority of South Africa's urban population." [90]

But poverty is no longer invisible, homelessness is right on the doorstep of middle class suburbia, where resources are easily available. Neighbourhood churches provide regular meals and other services and there are opportunities to generate some income through ad hoc car guarding. But it's an uneasy situation, with home and business owners, on occasion, objecting to loitering, public drinking of alcohol and disorderly behaviour.

There are exclusions that are perhaps less visible to those in suburbia. In Johannesburg many domestic workers are Zimbabwean, who out of economic necessity have come to work in South Africa. With regular flare-ups of xenophobic violence they are under a dangerous type of surveillance, and have to remain vigilant.

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[89] http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02114thQuarter2019.pdf Last accessed 18/02/2020

[90] Wilkinson, P. 1983. "Providing Adequate Shelter" *Working Papers in Southern African Studies* , Hindson, D.C. (editor). Johannesburg, cited in Chipkin, C.M. 1993. *Johannesburg Style Architecture & Society 1880s - 1960s,* Cape Town: David Philip. (Page 90)

CONCLUSION

Home offers not just a single meaning; even during the darkest days of our past and the complicated present, the interplay between people and homes, either their own home or one in which they work takes us constantly back and forth across "multiple landscapes", as Ginsburg says. [91] Robinson writes: "People always passed across the lines of the apartheid, across its cruel divides. Meeting in places of work, sharing the streets, looking up at the same buildings rising behind makeshift builders' walls. Moving across the spaces of the apartheid city evidently had different qualities and meanings for different people: the domestic worker in the white home, for example, whose crossing of the divide meant she was cruelly separated from her children; the family who visited the old neighbourhood they were forced to leave; the nurse working in a suburban rest home; the man visiting his lover late at night; night workers waiting in the inner city for the first bus home; men waiting on street corners for casual work; the soldier riding on top of the armoured vehicle watching for stone-throwers; the madam taking her domestic worker (almost) to her home with her extra baggage." [92]

While homes such as in Meadowlands were places of poverty, they are still "places where people build everyday lives, imagine and reimagine themselves, and make homes from which they set out to negotiate - and change – city spaces".[93]

It is in fiction that the multilayered aspects of a home can be delicately explored: do bricks and mortar conceal fear and insecurity or do they provide a sanctuary, a place of retreat?

There is one book, in particular, that renders home in the most evocative way, Noni Jabavu's *Drawn in Colour*,[94] and I quote at length excerpts from the closing chapter of the book. Jabavu writes of her love for the complicated place she calls home as she sits indoors with her cousin, looking out onto the veranda and garden where her father and his friend sit.

Jabavu writes: "I gazed at the verandah of our stone-built 'antique' house … harking back proudly to the hundred years' war with the Europeans ... it had been built as long ago as 1860 … Its owner had been an early European in these parts. More than ever now that I was

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[91] Ginsburg, (Page 4)

[92] Robinson, J, Essay D7

[93] Robinson, J. Essay D7

[94] Jabavu, N. 1960. *Drawn in Colour*, London: John Murray

back again, I loved my squat single-storied old home; its thick stone walls which my father had recently white washed, our water tanks at the corners; its green, newly painted zinc roof. And inside the ever open front door, I loved the rooms in their assorted shapes and sizes …The whole so 'colonial', rugged and rambling."

Jabavu reflects on the rugs "well worn and frayed at the edges", bowls of her late mother's favourite blue plumbago.[95] Even more compelling is the description of her father sitting on the veranda with a friend. "On this Sunday morning … the air was crisp and dry, light diffused by the roof that sloped over the long veranda outside. My father sat underneath it on a lounging wicker chair but bolt upright, his yellowing panama hat titled incongruously jauntily over his face. A few feet from him in the garden, next to the wire fence, sat his old friend, also bolt upright ... My cousin and I talked desultorily ... we enjoyed sitting silent for minutes on end. Here at home silent contact meant something positive, for you were filled with the same thoughts as your companion. We hardly slept, our night taken up with stories: her about teaching ... children in primary school 'in the mother tongue instead of English', the recent clock-reversing dispensation of the Nationalist Government. All teachers had also to learn Afrikaans now." [96]

The two women look through the window outside to where the two old men sit. "We listened to them. When not talking, they just sat ... My father and his friend were serene. In their old age they preferred to 'leave politics to the younger generation'. They had done what they could in their day. Their vote in the Cape had been taken away by General Smuts in 1936. After that their moderate tactics based on British gradualism had got them nowhere. Now they were old, younger people were trying other moves. Themselves, they could sit quietly on such a Sunday morning, in no hurry to go anywhere."

Jabavu continues: "They were telling each other nothing that the other did not know. It was just pleasant to review the past along with the changes, ruminate and draw on memory while the sunlight fell on the stones and wild flowers … Effortlessly they touched off the see-saw of talk again." [97]

Jabavu writes that "our woman servant" [98] alerts the two men that the second bell for church had rung. "My cousin and I sat alone … Surrounded as I was by the walls of my

[95] Jabavu, Page 191

[96] Jabavu, N. (Pages 194 - 195)

[97] Jabavu, N. (Page 198)

[98] Jabuvu, N. (Page 206)

home, savouring the historical background and physical characteristics … I was aware of the personalities it had produced in my parents, their generations, others before and since." Jabavu's cousin says to her: "Girl, this is home. The elders are still here, we will be elders for others in our turn. Akukhonto, Jili. Alles sal reg kom. All will come right!" [99]

The year 1961, in which the manuscript *Hospital Hill* is set, seems like a far-off place from the 1970s when I was child, and even more distant from post-apartheid South Africa. But in 2020, you don't have to look too closely to see that the patterns are still there — like the loosely crocheted cushion that rests on the piano stool in the sitting room of Hubbard House. The weaving is unravelling in one or two places, but the design is still intact. The patterns laid across the landscape of Johannesburg since the city was established in many ways remain fixed, and undoing the exclusion and inequality that persist has so far eluded new generations. But perhaps it is in homes that a beginning can be made to unravel the past and lay a better course for the future. So, perhaps the 1913 photograph will stay on the living room wall as a reminder of what made me and what work I still need to do. The present rests on the broken foundations of the past — a place that cannot be forgotten.

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"When an echo rolls out on an errand it can't stop. On reaching its destination it can't stop. And it has great difficulty pausing in the middle. There seems no end to the work of an echo. It must always be returning, bending and condensing what came before. Eventually, it is small enough to slip under the doors of its soundproof heaven, far from the falling branches, the risky walls, the bullets and the footsteps. Then it can stop shaking the air, and stoop down and forget. But sooner or later a god bursts out, or a lost soul starts pounding to be let in, or a band of angels arrive on a cloud. The doors slide open and the echo wakes up, restlessly wondering where it came from, and what all that noise is about outside."

Denis Hirson [100]

[99] Jabavu, N. (Page 208)

[100] Hirson, D. 1986. *The House Next Door To Africa*, Cape Town: David Philip (Page 1)

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